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# THE NOON-MARK



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TORONTO

# THE NOON-MARK

BY

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"The Boardman Family," "From  
Father to Son," etc.

New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

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# THE NOON-MARK

## PROLOGUE

**T**HERE was a time in the history of this nation when every considerable city in it strove more or less consciously to imitate the most considerable of them all, the city of New York. It is a strange thing to look back upon nowadays when the fashion has so completely gone by, and the cry is all for individualism, strong characterization, cultivating our own gardens, drinking from our own cups. We cherish, we emphasize and display our points of difference, not realizing that they have existed all along in spite of us, and that Detroit — for an instance — was never any more like Chicago — for an instance — than either one of them was like their big eastern model. But, let the rising generation believe it or not, about the year nineteen hundred, a kind of diluted metropolitanism flavored us all. We took to calling our numbered streets avenues, in one manifestation; in another, any new bridge, square, residence district or place of local prominence that needed a name at all was sure to be baptized from the New York directory. Particularly public resorts suffered or were glorified, as you choose; every "Park," every "Beach," every "Heights" in Manhattan and its environs had an army of namesakes; and I solemnly believe that there was no city through the whole extent of these United States without a Coney Island.

The mid-Western Coney, the Coney that I knew best, was not an island; indeed, I daresay very few of them were. It was a strip of land lying along a slight elevation above the river, ankle-deep in mud or dust according to the season, with a landing for the steam-boats, *Queen* and *Princess*, a thin grove of trees — *nemorosa Zacynthos!* — a restaurant, a dancing-platform, a carrousel, the entire equipment in short of its innumerable kindred Coney Islands. Pleasure-seekers could reach it by a five or six mile ride out of town on the trolley-car or omnibus; the automobile had not yet become a common and universal vehicle in those early days of which I write; but by far the greater number journeyed Coney-wards on the two excursion-boats, victims of an illusion of space and coolness contributed by the river. As a matter of fact the heat and glare of a summer day were doubled by reflection; the shady side had a trick of becoming the sunny side all of a sudden just when one was well-established, owing to the curves of the channel; forward the breeze blew your hat off, and to the rear it came laden with odors of coal-smoke, engine-grease, everybody's lunch-basket, sundry sewers emptying in nonchalantly from the Kentucky and Ohio municipalities on either shore, and the Little Miami stockyards. It was crowded, noisy, comfortless, in a word, ideal; for who ever heard of an excursion boat that was otherwise?

Nevertheless, as an earnest seeker after truth — or after that variety of truth which we imagine to be discoverable only among crowds — I have been to Coney Island by the boat more than once in past times; yea, I have trudged down Sycamore Hill to the wharf in the beating heat of July afternoons, and

eke have trudged up again through the sand and the imperishable chick-weed to the Island portals; I have eaten of a porterhouse and French-fried potatoes and have drunk a mug of ale in the restaurant, and have fared thence refreshed and shied rings at stakes (*at*, not around, for I was never much of a shot), and have rattled my anatomy about on all manner of toboggan-slides and shoot-the-chutes, and listened to the band discoursing antique airs — rag-time was a novelty then, and “Annie Rooney” the latest thing in the sentimental line! And later I have wended home by moonlight on the deck of the *Princess* with the calliope going (but not all the time, mercifully), and tired babies crying, and untired ones romping, and couples spooning in dark corners, generally around the smoke-stack, and the smells smelling stronger than ever in the night air. All of this I saw and part of it I was twenty years or so ago, heigh-ho! They drink no more ale at Coney since reform invaded us; those spooners have doubtless been married this long while; the babies may actually have babies of their own crying or romping in the same old fashion; the *Princess* went down the river the dreadful winter of '17-'18 to an epic end in the ice-jam above Louisville, and another *Princess* rides in her stead — all, all are gone, the old, familiar faces.

Perhaps some of them are no great loss; and it may as well be stated frankly, that using one's best endeavor, the search for truth was not notably forwarded on these occasions, truth appearing to be as shy of the company of the proletariat as of those upper classes about whose shortcomings we hear so much. The Coney Island visitors may have had less in their pockets than certain other visitors to certain other

resorts of greater fame and cost; and therefore, according to popular notions, they must have had a deal more in their heads and hearts; but it seemed to one student, at least, that there was not a pin to choose between the two. You heard gossip on the Coney boats as you hear gossip in the most exalted drawing-rooms, some of it mean, some good-natured, some uttered in mere idleness. You witnessed the same exhibitions of folly and greed and cowardice and lust that you witnessed everywhere, you were blessed and uplifted by the same spectacles of self-denial and courage and cleanliness and plain common-sense. Verily, there is nothing new under the sun — nothing new in men and women, at any rate. Among all my Coney Island voyages, I can recall only one encounter that differed from a thousand other encounters, or moved one to speculation as to the past, present or future of a single person that figured therein.

The deck-house is encircled by a bench that travelers may take advantage of its shade, which, however, as has been noted, fluctuates with a fine impartiality so that no one can be unduly favored; there mothers sit with nursing babies, and picnicing working-girls open their shoe-boxes and paper bags, and old women drowse or chatter or shepherd the grandchildren. It seems to be feminine territory by unvoiced common consent, for one seldom sees a man there. The men prefer camp-stools along the rail for the fuller freedom of movement perhaps, and the handiness of the water as a waste-basket; you may behold them aligned there by the scores in the silent or talkative sociability of which men have the secret; and though they have all unquestionably gone to Coney many times on these very boats and must be thoroughly acquainted



with the laws of river-travel as enforced aboard the *Queen* and *Princess*, it inevitably arrives during the course of every trip that one of them stretches his legs and hoists his feet upon the rail, and is incontinently reprimanded and made to desist from that attitude by the boat-policeman, who, by the way, is never seen or heard of on any other occasion. No one knows why the rail must be held sacred from peoples' heels, or why it has so powerful an attraction for them, no one knows where the policeman lurks between whiles; but this thing comes to pass with the scheduled regularity of the solar system. No sooner has some adventurer pushed his stool a pace back, elevated his legs, tilted his straw hat to the bridge of his nose or shoved it back from his forehead — no sooner has he made this comfortable disposition of himself than the officer turns up!

“Here, you! Take your feet off'n that rail. That ain't allowed,” he says, not sternly, but with an authentic air of force held in reserve.

“Huh? Oh, all right!” Nobody ever objects, or, in Coney Island speech, “starts something”; neighboring passengers glance incuriously, and sometimes a parcel of youngsters set up a jubilant, sing-song outcry: “Oo-oo-oo! Daddy had to take his feet down! *You* had to take your feet down, Daddy! Mommer, Mommer, th' p'leeceman made Daddy take his feet down!” which raises a lazy laugh. But, as a rule, the episode rouses no interest whatever; only once did I see it lead to anything — on that single occasion referred to already.

The man admonished dropped his feet to the deck, and meeting the indifferent eye of the man alongside him, grinned and remarked that the management was,

kind of careful of their woodwork, weren't they? The other agreed that they sure were with a perfunctory grin in his turn. But the next instant they exchanged a closer scrutiny which merged into surprised and tentative recognition, with half-finished ejaculations: "Can you beat it —?" "Well, I declare —!" "Was I sitting right by you all this time —?" and so on.

One was "Frank" and one was "Gus" — I did not catch the last names, if indeed they were uttered, but the "Mrs. Stieffel" or "Maggie" afterwards inquired about was plainly Frank's wife. The men were a little awkward at first, shaking hands, eyeing each other, evidently not knowing quite where or how to begin; it was fifteen years since Gus left here, I gathered, fifteen years since they had last met. They seemed to have been fairly intimate, though not very close friends, in the old days; both were verging on forty now, to judge by their looks. They finally settled to an interchange of questions about themselves and the "old crowd" — deaths, marriages, business failures and successes. Gus was "located" in Bangor, Maine. Hey? Oh yes, he left Wilkesbarre — let's see — nearly ten years before; yes, it was all of ten years, it was the year of the World's Fair — the Chicago World's Fair. He never liked Wilkesbarre — never had any idea of locating there permanently. Bangor was a good town. No, he didn't expect to be here any length of time; he'd have to go right back. He wouldn't be here now, fact is, only an old uncle of his died the other day out on the old farm down the river in Anderson Township, and he'd had to come out to settle up the estate. Pretty hot and he'd been pretty busy, you know, or he'd have tried to get around

and look up some of the folks — you know how that is: you get busy and your mind's on things back home anyhow — and first thing you know, you've got to go back — you know how that is. He guessed there'd been a good many changes; saw Hack Johnson, though, in the Recorder's office when he went up to the Courthouse on some of his estate business. Hack looked just the same; he was training with that public-office crowd before he, Gus, went away —

Frank, for his part, was still at the bank. Yeah, he'd stuck right there, and always expected to. He wished Gus could find time to come out and see his place; he'd bought a nice little home out here in Maplehurst — that was one of the new subdivisions, Gus wouldn't hardly know where it was, but you took the Kensington Park cars, and it was only a twenty-minutes ride. He'd bought a home there when it was first opened; got it all paid for now. He wished Gus would come out. First thing Maggie would say to him when he told her about their running across each other this way would be: "Why, *Frank*, you don't tell me you let him get away without me seeing him?" No, she wasn't on the boat; he was just taking the kids up to Coney and back for the river ride like he often did Saturday afternoons through the summer. It was partly to give their mother a rest, you know; tell you, a woman gets mighty tired and nervous sometimes with a houseful of kids, and one or another of 'em into something the whole time — good children, you know, but they're *children*. The girls were getting so they were more help to her now, though. Hey? Why, sure! His oldest, Nettie, she was the oldest, she was about grown; she was in her third year at high school and crazy to drop it and get into some

kind of work; they want their own money, you know, when they get that old. Yeah, sure, he had a girl sixteen years old. Well, it seemed funny to him, too, when he stopped to think about it. She was around somewhere on the boat with the rest of the bunch, they'd come along directly.

Gus, it transpired, was married, too — married a Portland girl, but they had no family. Whatever had become of Joe Peters? Uh-huh. You don't say! He understood Peabody — Jim Peabody he meant, of course, he didn't mean the old man, *he* was about ready to die even before Gus left here and must have passed out long ago — but he understood Jim was making good with the old machine-tool business at last; he ran into him in New York here recently, and Jim certainly looked as if things might be coming his way. You can generally tell, you know. Hey? Oh yes, Jim remembered him and was quite friendly — for *him*, that is. You know Jim Peabody never was easy to know — one of these kind of reserved men — all right, of course, but kind of reserved.

They kept on talking, and presently talked themselves into confidences which both may have afterwards regretted; at the moment, ironically enough, their gossip brought them nearer together than they ever could have been in the past. I took Gus to be the brighter man, probably, but Stieffel, if that was his name, had a nice face, a kindly, honest face; and I liked him for the way he had spoken about his Maggie. Maplehurst in those days was a cheap, over-built little suburb, with box-like brick houses and peculiarly hideous bungalows crowded on lots not more than thirty feet wide; and I pictured Mrs. Stieffel cooking and sewing and doing all the work of the house from

morning to night without any maid — they could scarcely afford a maid even if maids would consent to live in Maplehurst — and the children “into something the whole time.” Undoubtedly she had seen her own mother drudging as hard and constantly; but did that deter her from entering upon the same career when young Frank Stieffel came a-wooing? Maybe she had had loftier expectations for herself and Frank, but was she therefore disappointed and embittered now? Why, not at all! Frank was good to her, he had no reprehensible habits; the children were trying sometimes, but they were her children and she loved to “do for” them; they owned their own home, very likely she had golden oak furniture and a pianola and lace curtains; she was a proud, happy, contented woman.

“That’s them now,” said Frank; “that’s Nettie, the one with the brown hair. No use trying to catch her eye — they’re always rubbering around every direction but where you want ’em to. Wait till she looks this way, and I’ll give her the high sign.”

“Got a full house, haven’t you?” said the other man, indulgently feigning interest; but there was a note of real feeling, a genuine and strong admiration in the tone in which he added: “Say, Frank, those girls are peaches. They — why, they’re *peaches*, both of ’em!”

His enthusiasm moved me to some “rubbering” on my own account; but the decks were crowded alow and aloft with straw hats, flowered hats, shirt-waists and shirt-sleeves, with brown heads, bald heads, all sorts of heads; it was impossible to make out exactly where or at whom the two men were looking, particularly as my own field of vision comprehended no

young women answering to my conception of peaches, whatever Mr. Gus's might be. I did catch sight, however, of a youthful acquaintance, namely: Randon McQuair, perched on a packing-case that must have been voyaging up the river in the interests of the Coney Island soft-drink dispensary — or maybe the hard one; it had GLASS, HANDLE WITH CARE stencilled along the side over which Randy's legs were dangling and swinging. He looked up, squinting his eyes against the strong glare of the sky, and saw me and took off his hat; had I been another male, or nearer his own age — which I take to have been seventeen or eighteen at this date — he might have waved at me, or made some jocular demonstration in greeting; but even in these informal surroundings, from one deck to another of the Coney *Princess*, Randon's manner to a middle-aged friend of his grandmother's expressed, as always, a shy and manly courtesy, uncalculated and, in this graceless day, singularly attractive.

“You'd think so, if you had to buy shoes for 'em,” Frank said, answering his companion's first comment with a specious air of complaint; actually he was bursting with pride and fondness. “Billy — that's that towhead with the red balloon, see him? — that kid's death on shoes. Looks like he must eat 'em, he gets through 'em so fast. Why, I think they're something on looks myself, Gus. I guess I can say it; anybody can see they don't take after *me*. The one with the black hair isn't mine anyhow.”

“Oh! Well, the other's pretty enough for two.”

“Yeah. But don't all the girls look pretty to you nowadays? And *young*! My lordy, it seems to me they're the youngest things alive! Sign I'm growing

old, I expect. Don't that black-haired one remind you of anybody, though?"

Gus leaned forward, and bestowed a long stare on the black-haired one presumably, though even with this to guide me, I was still unable to identify her. He frowned in an effort of memory, then shook his head, settling back and turning a negative grimace towards his friend.

"Nope. Who is it? Anybody I ought to know?"

"Why, yes. She's Mattie Snyder's girl."

"You don't say?" His face, however, expressed no spontaneous interest; perhaps Gus was beginning to tire of the rôle civility had imposed on him. After all, fifteen years had intervened, during which none of these people had missed him much or inquired after him, obviously; and it was a far cry to Bangor, Maine, where all his cares and associations now centered. "You don't say?" he repeated mechanically. "Well, Mattie used to be some looker. Let's see, I can't seem to recollect much about her. Who did she go with?"

"Why, all of us — all of the crowd. She was a cousin of my wife's. The Snyders lived in one of those double-bricks on Western Row near the old City Hospital, remember?"

"Western Row? Oh, sure! Yeah, I remember. What's become of Mattie?"

"Why, she's dead," said Frank, his features putting on and almost immediately putting off a seemly gravity, after the fashion of most of us when reporting a like event. "Yes, poor Mattie's been gone quite a while. Millie lives with us; she's just about our girl's age, so we took her after her father and mother died."

"Didn't have enough of your own already, hey?" remarked the other amused, it may be faintly con-

temptuous. I fancied him telling himself that Frank Stieffel always was easy.

“Oh well, my wife’s folks, you know, Gus. You know how that is; you can’t hardly refuse sometimes,” the latter said deprecatingly. “The child hadn’t anybody, not a soul — and nothing to live on, not a cent. We didn’t want her depending on strangers. Maggie worried a good deal over it; so the end of it was I just picked up and went out there and got her and brought her home.”

“Out where? Didn’t they live here?” said Gus, yawning openly.

“No. California.”

“Gee whizz! That was a good ways to go.”

“Oh, I didn’t mind the trip. Fact is, it’s a pretty nice trip —” Here they ranged off on a discussion of the Californian climate, coast scenery, mountain scenery, orange and lemon ranches, string-bean ranches, oriental labor, bungalows, irrigation methods, and so on, winding up with the declaration that it was all right for a change, but give *them*, severally, Ohio and Maine.

“Trouble is, it’s too kind of unnatural,” Gus observed profoundly. “You get tired of never having to worry about the weather. You want more variety, even if it isn’t so pleasant. And take the people out there. Too many invalids and cranks to suit *me*. I never met anybody from California yet, that wasn’t nuts about something or other.”

“Same here!” And hereupon Frank, not without an occasional chuckle, proceeded to relate some corroborative recollections. Mattie’s husband, this fellow Aymar that she married, Frank had met only once or twice, but, by all accounts, he got to be one of the



nuttiest; he wasn't that way when they went there, you know; he just got that way afterwards, like they all seem to. When they were married, he was a paint salesman; he was travelling for the Banner Paint Company — Cleveland concern — when Mattie met him. He seemed to be making a pretty good living at it; Frank guessed he knew considerable about the paint business. Anyway, the company sent him out to Sacramento; and here after they'd been there a year or so, didn't he all at once drop the paint job, and go down to Los Angeles, and next thing you know he was running some kind of a church down there — one of these new religions, you know! No, it wasn't Christian Science, it was some kind of Hindoo religion, where you wore one of those turbans, and went into trances. They called him B'hana Upshei — sure thing, they did! B, apostrophe, h — He spelled it out, interrupted by his own and his companion's laughter. In unison, they inquired if you could beat it? At that, Frank asserted, there were others; the b'hana had quite a congregation. They paid some kind of dues; it was one of these sort of little settlements or communities, you know. He couldn't understand why the police didn't raid the place once in a while; but everything goes in California! He judged the b'hana must have made a tolerably good thing out of it, while he lasted. After all you don't need much to live on in California; nobody cares how you do, or what you look like; it was an easy way to get along, you couldn't deny that. Oh yes, he was there two-three days, and met the whole boiling of b'hanas and b'hanees — that's what they called the women; some of 'em were married legally and some not, by the looks of things. He didn't ask. He just got the little girl

and cleared out. She was about eleven at the time. He looked serious transiently, expressing the conviction that his wife was right, and he was glad to get Millie away from that bunch; it wasn't any place for a child, especially a little girl. In another year or two they'd have gotten her filled up with some of their off-color notions about marriage and property and one thing and another. As it was — he burst out laughing again as he recited how he had corrected the youngster for some trifling fault, and how she had retorted upon him with a sublime air of tolerance, that their souls did not vibrate in the same plane!

“Didn't, hey?” said Gus, grunting appreciatively; “Well, right then I'd have vibrated a slipper in a plane where it would have done considerable good to her body — and chances are to her soul, too. If you wanted to break up this b'hana foolishness the speediest way, that is.”

“Oh, well,” Frank said in his humane way. “I didn't. If she'd been my own young one — but your wife's folks, you know. You know how you feel about that. She's gotten over most of it. They forget awfully quick.”

This was only one of a dozen manifestly unconsidered and unostentatious speeches he made, the cumulative effect of which was to re-affirm within me the conviction that Mr. Frank Stieffel was one of the haloless, everyday saints, the plain-man saints whom we may sometimes come across on this pilgrimage. Yes, he was a saint with his commonplace features, his thinning hair, his well-worn business suit, his gimcrack emblem of the Order of Bears or Beavers or some other nonsensical society in his buttonhole. Doubtless he entertained erroneous ideas about the

time and place to use toothpicks and the way to hold a fork; doubtless, too, he liked to take off his coat and collar and sit stocking-footed on the front porch hot summer evenings after he got home from the bank, reading the paper, while Maggie rattled among the supper dishes. He made, at a guess, about twenty-one hundred a year, and, at another guess, he would never make any more; there was no hint of force or ability about his kind and simple presence. But he was a saint, for all that. You might depend on him to get up in the middle of the night and help with the baby when it fretted, or to stoke the furnace fire, or to go out and hunt up that wretched, drink-ridden Lushead next door when poor Mrs. Lushead came crying and reported him missing, or to wear the same old overcoat for five winters hand-running so that he could spare the money to have little Frank's teeth straightened. These may not be saintly deeds; of course we all of us perform them whenever occasion arises cheerfully, ungrudgingly, tactfully and with no idea of winning applause — of course! Still I stick to it that Frank was a saint; and seeing that this is only a prologue and has nothing on earth to do with the real story, I may be allowed to have my say for once.

The sun changed sides just as Frank and Gus reached this point in their dialogue; and they presently got up and moved around to the shade with most of the other passengers in our vicinity — everybody except myself, indeed. I had no more than a glimpse of them again, when we were leaving the boat, and I recognized their two backs ahead of me, Frank's shoulders rounded and stooping a little in his blue serge coat that was rather rubbed and shiny in places,

and the other quite upright and natty by contrast. But in the meanwhile I had not been without entertainment; for, soon after the change, while I was still sitting, the McQuair boy came sauntering along the deck, impervious to sun or shade, in company with a tall and extraordinarily sightly young lady. She was very trim and nice in the starched white duck skirt spreading like a bell about her ankles, and the white linen waist with a stiff high collar and stiff cuffs, which all the girls were wearing at this period. Her thick, rich, copper-colored hair was built out over the contemporaneous "rat" with ever so many puffs and braids and little curls, on top of which there was stationed a wide-brimmed, wide-crowned hat secured by a perfect harpoon of a pin at least eighteen inches long; all in all, dress, complexion, teeth, big straight-forward eyes, fine regular features, she was nothing short of stunning. But it was actually neither her looks nor her undeniable style that fixed my attention; it was the fact that she had by the hand a stout little boy with a red balloon — and a towhead, too, let all the gods of chance bear witness! Two or three or half a dozen more children of varying ages and sizes trailed around — I had no time to determine which or how many of them were Stieffels, for on the instant some one cried out: "Wait, Net!" and there came running a second young girl, laughing and ejaculating and flashing another pair of beautiful eyes at Randy, who, naturally enough, never saw me, never even cast a look in my direction this time. They all three sat down in front of me.

Girl Number Two was just as pretty as Netty, but not nearly so crisp, smart, *soignée*. Her pink sash-ribbon needed pressing, her all-over-embroidery skirt

hung limp, and a thought unevenly at the hem; perhaps it was harder to dress her than the other, her young figure being a good deal fuller, with more suggestion of softness, somehow. Nettie had the half-ripe and graceful lankiness of a sixteen-year-old Diana; her throat was thin, her firm little chin almost sharp where Millie's rounded sweetly; her eyes were bright and steady as a bird's, and I think she had no idea of making play with them under their long, thick lashes at young McQuair; whereas Miss Millie brought hers into action at once, after the oldest and best-known methods. As for Randy, he gallantly divided his attention between them, as might have been expected of him; and, as might also have been expected, he was very patient and good-tempered and efficient in helping Nettie manage her crew of small brothers and sisters. She seemed to realize a responsibility about them much more keenly than the Millie girl, as was perhaps natural.

The thing that was not in the least natural, the thing not to be expected or accounted for about this whole business was that it could happen at all. I humbly hope and trust that I am no snob; I believe that the old lady McQuair was not. She was, on the contrary, a fine old gentlewoman who would no more make distinctions between people than — than any other fine old gentlewoman. Nevertheless, it was impossible not to view with wonder and misgivings her grandson Randon in this Stieffel circle. What was he doing there? How, how under the heavens had he ever come to know the Stieffel girl, the Aymar girl? And, knowing them, how could he not only stand them, but, as it would seem, seek them? Not that they were not nice girls, well-behaved girls; all three young people

did and said nothing that any other three young people, even of the loftiest caste, the McQuair caste itself, might not have done and said. But — *but* —! It goes to show that nobody can tell what a boy will do, remote from the maternal or grandmaternal eye. You may bring him up by the most rigid formulas, or by no formulas whatever, it's all one. Let him escape for a single hour, and he will revert to the aboriginal male. Girls are different; they harden in the mold into which they are run.

The youngsters' talk was not especially diverting, mostly giggles and glances, occult allusions, jokes to which they alone held the key. Once when it seemed to falter for a moment, Millie reached out and took a book from the side-pocket of Randon's summer coat, and opened it with lazy curiosity, riffling the leaves.

"'Poetic Parables,'" she read aloud. Her voice was light and pleasant, well-placed, free from either the nasal or the guttural quality sadly common amongst us; and she read, to my surprise, with facility and a certain taste. "What does it mean by poetic parables?"

"Why, sort of short stories," said Randy, in some embarrassment. Perhaps he was vaguely aware that poetic parables were not conspicuously suited to the present company; perhaps, indeed, he suspected that they were not conspicuously suited to himself, and had all the young man's painful dread of being laughed at for either real or sham erudition. "It's a Library-book. I just happened to pick it up, and thought I'd take it home," he explained hastily.

"I like short stories — if they're good," said Nettie. "I can't read long ones. It takes too much time."

"Here's one: '*The Fox*,' by Kahlil Gibran — funny

name! He must be foreign," Millie announced, and forthwith read:

"A fox looked at his shadow at sunrise and said, 'I will have a camel for lunch today.' And all morning he went about looking for camels. But at noon he saw his shadow again — and he said, 'Oh, well, a mouse will do.'"

After a brief expectant pause, Nettie said: "Well, go on, why don't you?"

"There isn't any more. That's all of it."

"Wha-at? Oh, you! Go on, read the rest of it."

"No, honestly it ends right there. That's all, honestly. Here, look for yourself, if you don't believe me." Millie held the open book towards her, and Nettie studied the page whereon "*The Fox*" appeared, with frank disbelief that gradually gave place to frank astonishment.

"Well, of *all* things!" she exclaimed, and appealed to Randon in a popular catch-phrase of the day. "What do you know about that? I like 'em short, but not *that* short. Why, it doesn't make sense. It's hardly got any beginning or end. Are they all that way? The rest of the book?"

"I don't know. I haven't read it all yet," said the boy awkwardly. He must have been too young to grasp the whole significance, at once humorous and melancholy, of Kahlil Gibran's fantasy, but he had some inkling of it; and I think the girl's unimaginative comment somehow jarred on him. He looked at Millie, and that budding tactician immediately took the hint! To a dead certainty, she had no more idea than Nettie what the parable was all about, but she

was too acute to betray herself; her voice and her answering look conveyed a sympathetic understanding which fell short of perfection only by being too perfect! — the specific fault of inexperience. But she would learn. Miss Mildred Aymar would learn.

“Isn't Net funny, though? She doesn't care for books, you know. I do. I *love* to read, don't you? I'd love not to have to do anything else — just *read* all day long! I think this is *fascinating* — it's so sort of veiled and mysterious. Would you mind lending it to me? I'd be awfully careful of it.”

“For goodness' sake, Millie, don't you know he can't lend a Library-book?” said Nettie, not too amiably. She was evidently a practical young person, and it might be that the other's unpracticalities vexed her, or again it might be — but who will pretend to fathom the feminine mind at sixteen? “She can put her name in to get it as soon as you take it back. We've got a Library-card,” she advised in a brisk and capable style — too brisk, too capable, alas! *She* would never learn, Miss Nettie Stieffel would never learn.

“Oh, that's all right. That's all right, of course —” said Randon confusedly. “You can have the book any time you want it.” By the fleeting look of abstraction in his eyes, I judged that Mr. McQuair whose monthly allowance of spending-money could not have been very spacious, was taking a rapid mental survey of assets and liabilities, and wondering what he could go without in order to buy and present to the young lady a copy of “Poetic Parables”; a dollar and a quarter is a devastating sum under certain conditions.



The Coney Island excursion and the above related adventure — so to call it — came to an end shortly thereafter. We all landed and went our separate ways, as the characters will continue to do henceforward, unconscious of my all-seeing eye, and nowise subject to my influence. For, as I have said, I only fancied thus and so about them, what they were, what they had done, what they would do; let us see, if you please, how near I came to the truth. This Prologue is ended; the introductory speeches are made, lacking nothing of the dullness of all introductory speeches; and it only remains for the speaker to bow and withdraw.

## I

IT was about the year eighteen eighty-five that young Frank Stieffel, having got a raise in his salary at the Travelers' And Traders', corner of Orchard and Fourth, where he had started in as bank-messenger and gradually worked up to the accounting department, felt himself at last free to get married. His mother died the winter before, so Frank would not have that care any longer, and his sister Julia had a good job, skirt-fitter with Fritsch, Ladies' Tailor-Made Suits and Habits, up on Seventh Street. Maggie Lindtner said yes, and they had a nice wedding, and a honeymoon week at Niagara Falls; and when they came back, set up housekeeping in one of the Primrose Flats down on South Fourth, only six or seven squares from the bank. Frank could come home to luncheon, which he had ingenuously calculated upon as an economy, to say nothing of the delights of another meal in his own home with his wife; and in fact he did come home regularly for the first six months or so. After that, the neighbor flat-dwellers, benevolently interested behind their window-curtains, passed the word around that you couldn't set your watch by "him" any more; only twice the last few weeks, and now only on Saturdays, when the bank and all the business-offices closed early; the women, exchanging significant glances, opined that cooking three times a day was too much for "her"—"And she's not crazy about work, anyhow," the sharper-

tongues (who are never lacking in any society) remarked. But they were one and all very kind about snatching time from their own busy kitchens to help in hers, running in and sitting with her, cooking little dainties, crocheting little garments, liberal in both advice and entertainment. That the first was tepidly received and never followed, they overlooked in the warmth of the welcome accorded the second. Young Mrs. Stieffel loved to talk — she said so herself — loved to be talked to, loved to hear the newest news, or even news that was more or less old, provided it be sufficiently racy, high-colored, dramatic.

Left to herself, in default of a good, tasty piece of gossip, she would read; she loved to read, too. Classics from "The Seaside Library" and the "Fire-side Companion," paper-backed romances by Laura Jean Libbey, by Miss Braddon, by Bertha M. Clay, by Anna Katherine Green, cumbered her pantry-shelves, rather to the detriment, if the truth must be told, of the saucepans, tableware and housewifely provisions popularly considered to have the prior right there. Mrs. Maggie would sometimes forget the dull routine of dishwashing and bed-making in favor of a rocking-chair and an engrossing story; and after all, who could blame her? She was just a young girl, introduced all at once to the drudgeries and responsibilities of wifhood, with motherhood imminent in the offing; like all youth, she had the valor and the carelessness of inexperience, did not know how to do anything, did not want to do anything, and was not apprehensive about anything. The more mature women talked her over amongst themselves with amusement, wonder and pity, dashed occasionally with an impatience for which they, too, could scarcely be blamed.

“No use telling her anything, she hasn’t got any idea of what she’s up against,” one would confide to another. “She’s awful young, of course, but — Maybe I was just as phootling right at the beginning, but I don’t know — Seems to me I *did* think about doctors’ bills, and the baby’s clothes, and whether it was going to be a boy or girl, and how we was going to make out on Jim’s pay, and s’posing something happened to him, what would I do, and all things like that, you know. Seems like it’s kinda natural to worry — besides being scared to death of the end. I wouldn’t say anything to scare her for the world, but it’s funny she ain’t scared anyhow. Oh, I know lots of ’em *say* they’re not, but they are, just the same — scared out of their lives; and good reason to be! But she don’t care — just plain don’t care or don’t re’lize. Not about her looks, nor about what the kid’s going to wear, nor nothing. Well, it’s all *right*, of course, but — *I ain’t built that way, that’s all!*”

“She’s looking for her mother to do for her, like she always has,” the other would surmise sagely. “She acts like one of the kind that their mothers haven’t ever left do anything for theirselves, just waited on ’em hand and foot. I heard Mis’ Lindtner had property, too,” she finished thoughtfully — and not so irrelevantly as might appear on the surface.

The lady in question, however, displayed no marked efficiency and even less interest on her infrequent visits to her daughter’s home. Mrs. Lindtner was a listless, worn-out woman of fifty-odd who, having had six or eight children, not unnaturally regarded the coming event as nothing out of the way or worthy of especial exertion on her part. For the rest, everybody agreed that it was easy to see Maggie came rightly by

her taste for fiction — in whatever form — and her disposition to let everything else, including herself, slide; there would be two of them rocking and reading when the neighbors dropped in, now. The sewing-machine continued to stand idle; the kitchen was no cleaner and no busier because of the maternal presence. Frank Stieffel came home every day loaded down with canned eatables, with packages from the bakery and delicatessen, as before; he was reported to have gotten up and made his own coffee more than one morning; and by some of the more searching and conscientious observers to have been seen washing the dishes at nine o'clock at night after their ready-to-serve dinner was over when his wife had gone to bed and his mother-in-law to church. "Nothing like taking things easy!" Mrs. Downstairs commented to Mrs. Upstairs ironically. There is something about the spectacle of another woman's husband washing her dishes that will arouse the mildest of wives to a singular pitch of scorn and indignation; she would rather her John Henry came home drunk and smashed the furniture than have him fall so low as to wash the dishes.

In the end — that is to say, a bare six weeks before little Nettie's arrival — it was Frank's sister who took matters in hand, and made sure of the baby's comfort at any rate; perhaps she was not so much concerned about the mother's. Miss Julia Stieffel was already verging on old-maidhood; she was nearly thirty, her brother's senior by two or three years; but, spinster and all, she evinced ten times as much goodwill and capacity for dealing with the situation as both the other women put together. If her knowledge of babies was theoretical, she herself was eminently

practical. Julia had worked hard and made her own living, at first in part but very soon wholly, from the day she started out wrapping packages at the Bon Marché when she was fourteen up to the present moment. She was a swarthy, bony, heavy-browed girl with a rasping nasal voice, and a figure which sundry wags averred to be the worst possible advertisement for the tailor's establishment that employed her, thin without being slender, like a shingle. She was a walking caricature of the modes; they said it was a wonder Fritsch dared to have her around his place. As a skirt-fitter she was unexcelled, yet her own skirts hung any way and every way; her belts and blouses never met, her hats were piteous. To all hints or suggestions, Julia would retort impatiently that she was too busy with other people's things to fuss with her own, and much those ladies cared what she looked like, didn't they? They paid to have their skirts fitted, they didn't pay to see a swell dresser. It was the truth; she was too busy; industry was an obsession with her. Her scissors clashed, her needle flew, her machine thundered all through Fritsch's day and as far into the night as he exacted. Julia had never heard of the forty-eight hour week, or of time-and-a-half for over-time, nor indeed had anybody else at that date; but even if she had it may be doubted if she would have insisted on her rights or taken the measures so popular nowadays to secure them. She worked for work's sake as much as for her eighteen dollars a week; the desire was native, even if it had not been ingrained by habit and necessity.

So Julia came down to the Primrose, every day after hours, and all day Sundays, in defiance of the opinions of the righteous, with a roll of fine goods, lawn,

embroidery, flannel or what-not which she had bought out of the savings from her weekly eighteen under one arm, with her thimble and her rapacious scissors, with floss silks and tiny lace buttons, with the spectacles she had lately been obliged to mount; and cut, snipped, stitched, stitched, stitched for the baby with an energy nothing short of diabolical in the eyes of the other two women. It did not offend them by contrast with their own leisure, nor did it occur to them to emulate it; they merely wondered and were awed.

“She never uses any pattern, not a single smitch of a one — just cuts out by her eye!” Mrs. Stieffel declared with sincere admiration. “My, I’d give anything if *I* could! But there wouldn’t be any use my trying, even *with* a pattern. I can’t make head or tail out of ’em. I’d only spoil the stuff, and it would be just plain straight-out waste of money. I never *could* learn to sew.”

“’Tain’t anything. Any fool can learn if they want to,” said Julia, grimly biting off a thread. “As long as you’re just setting there with nothing else on hand, Maggie, you might pull the basters out of this while I’m runnin’ tucks, will you? Say, Mis’ Lindtner, don’t you b’lieve you better stir that apple-sauce? Smells to me like it was scorching, and it’s easier for you to get up than me with my lap full.”

“Ain’t she the bossy one, though?” said Frank, smiling a little uneasily, glancing at his wife and mother-in-law. But they complied amiably, without dreaming of resenting Julia’s bossiness. Setting aside the fact that it saved them the trouble of planning, or of making decisions, it seemed proper to her character and achievements to boss. Anybody who could do what Julia did, they said — and honestly thought

— had a right to go ahead her own way, and have other people stand around — “ Even if she does fly out, and pretty near bite your head off sometimes,” Maggie said leniently. “ She don’t mean it. She just gets nervous, and no wonder! Look how she drives! I hate to see her driving that way, but she *will* do it, you can’t *make* her spare herself. I only hope and pray she won’t break down some day, that’s all. Julia’s as good as can be to all of us,” Maggie said, her eyes filling. It never entered her head to lighten Julia’s cares and labors by taking some part of them upon herself; she would have explained that Julia might not like it. Julia was so particular, she, Maggie, was afraid of interfering, even though the present business was surely her legitimate concern.

Miss Nettie Stieffel came on the scene with an up-to-the-minute readiness and expedition which would have engaged her aunt’s good graces, even if the latter had not been already in a welcoming mood. In after years Julia used to assert that Nettie never made anybody wait a second or gave anybody a bit of trouble, not even when she was born! “ Maggie didn’t have more than time to get her breath for a good yell when there the baby was! And that’s the way Net’s been ever since. You always know where she is, and if you don’t know what she’s doing, you can bank on it’s being all right, anyhow,” Julia would say, laughing, but with a flush of pride and tenderness all over her homely face. She might have rendered the very same report of the other Stieffel children who came with, if possible, increasing ease and regularity during the next ten years or more, and who were reasonably satisfactory as to looks and disposition; but their aunt was not nearly so much interested in them. In her own



phrase, she “thought a lot” of Frank — she would make even that evasive admission of affection shamefacedly — and so, of course, she “thought a lot” of all Frank’s boys and girls; but Nettie was the first. Julia had sewed her heart and all her furtive maternalism into those delicate tucks, those dear little frocks and furbelows; for Frank’s sake she had tried to hope the child would be a boy; but the fact that it was a girl who gave the assurance, as time advanced, of an unusual, striking and seductive beauty crookedly compensated poor Julia for her own lack of attraction. If she had ever cherished any illusions about herself, they had withered pitifully long ago in the sterile atmosphere of realities; not even youth had enabled her to overcome her sad and grotesque handicaps; no man had ever looked at her save with that compassion which is more bitter to endure than the sight of physical recoil. In little Nettie, whose future glowed with the promise of innumerable coquette’s triumphs, the older woman, with a pathetic unreason, saw her own score against Fate settled at last.

With all her devotion, however, she did not spoil the little girl; besides being naturally secretive where her feelings were concerned, mortally afraid of showing any emotion except temper, Julia was a sensible, right-minded woman. She realized that she could not do Nettie a greater wrong than to pet and humor her, or treat her with marked favoritism. Accordingly she schooled herself to an impartiality perhaps only possible to conscientious old maids; if she took Nettie to the photographer, she took Annie — the next but one — with her; if she made Nettie’s velvet coat for the winter, or dressed her doll, why, Frank junior got the equivalent in a suit or a pair of roller-skates. The

aunt never consciously softened her voice and manner towards the youngster, never took Nettie's part unless in strict justice, never spared her a sharp criticism. It was only when measles or whooping-cough or other plagues of childhood broke out amongst the Stieffel brood that Julia's heroic self-repression gave way; she sat haggardly by Nettie's crib all night, hung on the doctor's words in torturing anxiety, rushed out and bought medicines, flowers, delicacies, toys, anything and everything the small sufferer had a whim for, with a wild profusion in startling contrast to her habitually somewhat over-strained frugality. "Poor Jule, it breaks her all up to have the house full of sick kids!" Maggie said with indulgence. "I keep telling her it's no more than what all children have got to go through with, and not a bit serious, just a whole lot of trouble, all of 'em whining round, and wanting to be held all the time. But, my goodness, I might as well hold my hush. Minute one of 'em coughs, Julia goes right up in the air, sure they're all going to die! That's the old maid of it, all over!"

Mrs. Maggie, as she grew older, notwithstanding the steadily enlarging family circle, never allowed its attendant responsibilities to weigh on her; she still loved to talk and loved to read, and still found ample leisure for those pursuits, as in the first days before there was any family to mention. Nothing like taking it easy! But indeed the Stieffel children were an exceptionally healthy, active lot, not naturally in need of much shepherding; and one and all they learned at a very early age, out of stark necessity, how to take care of themselves and to manage their own affairs, Nettie, in particular, displaying a notable precocity that way.

In mature years, she could never place the time when it had been forcibly borne in upon her that somebody besides her mother must take order for the comfort and well-being of the household; she seemed to herself to have come into the world with that knowledge, and with that care on her mind. But let no tender heart be unduly moved at the thought of childish shoulders burdened so unchildishly; Nettie liked it! At five years old she was a capable nurse for the younger babies; at seven she could darn stockings or put on a button with credit even in competition with a professional like her Aunt Julia; at ten, to come home from school, help get supper and do all the washing up afterwards was almost an everyday occurrence with her; she had even been known to bake a batch of bread Saturday afternoon besides giving all the other little Stieffels their weekly bath — or making them take it. Nettie generally contrived to divide the domestic duties so that every one got a fair share proportioned to his strength and abilities; she was no Cinderella, not she! She was a brisk little shrew with an unlimited appetite for both work and authority, and no great store of patience with the opposite qualities; laziness or timidity or reluctance irritated her, and instinctively she hated dirt, hated waste, hated mismanagement. In many respects, people discovered in her a strong likeness to her aunt — always setting apart looks. And why Nettie had not “taken after” Julia in that direction, too, Mrs. Stieffel used confidentially to wonder; she gave thanks, but still wondered. Julia, she would explain, had been with her constantly before the child’s birth, which, of course, accounted for the resemblance between their characters; those pre-natal

influences, you know — she had read a great deal about them in the women's monthlies — all of which she took; the articles were so helpful.

By this time there had been some changes in the Stieffel fortunes. They no longer lived in the Primrose Flats, the home of Nettie's first recollections. When she was about eight years old, and just after the fourth child was born, Mrs. Lindtner died. She had not made a strong or lasting impression on her small granddaughter's mind, or perhaps on anybody's mind; and Nettie, besides, was much too busy for mourning even if she had been disposed to mourn, what with the care of the new baby and the other two and the innumerable errands and odd jobs about the house and in connection with the funeral which she was incessantly being called upon to perform. The youngster did it all promptly and thoroughly. Friends and neighbors who went in to help commented to one another on her tirelessness, her efficiency; they agreed that she didn't seem to feel bad like you'd think she would about her grammaw, but of course she was too little to re'lize yet. Nettie wondered at their sniffing and sighing and hushed voices; it may be that her childish shrewdness detected something perfunctory about these demonstrations. Mrs. Frank, who was a soft-hearted, affectionate creature, wept appropriately and profusely until the estate came to be settled up, and it was found that her share of the "property," which gossip had heard and guessed about, would amount to as much as twenty-five hundred dollars. No sorrow, no matter how sincere — and Maggie's was sincere in its kind — could survive in its original sharpness so gratifying a surprise. Twenty-five hundred dollars! And there

was no inheritance-tax in those days to shadow an heir's happy anticipations — if an heir could be happy, that is; we all know, of course, that they are always steeped in grief, as was Mrs. Stieffel, whenever she stopped to think about it. Twenty-five hundred dollars would enable them to move, to get a real house, a home of their own; and coming just at this time when they were beginning to be terribly crowded in the flat, and that part of Fourth was running down so, with Italians moving in and a Greek shoe-black next to the saloon —! Any open-minded person will concede that Maggie could not stop to think of the deceased very often under the circumstances.

Sure enough, Frank Stieffel (who, according to gossip again, must have been too held down by the heavy expense of such a family to have saved anything himself) now went bravely out and bargained for one of the houses that were going up in the new subdivision of Maplehurst, the other side of Adams Road, on the North Hill. “A restricted neighborhood —” as the speculative gentlemen who were interested in this real-estate development advertised — “A restricted neighborhood, next to the classiest residential district on the Hill. NO ASSESSMENTS. All curbs, sewers, etc., in and paid for. Must be seen to be appreciated. PRICES RIGHT. Come early, Mr. Homeseeker, if you don't want to get left.” Frank went early and was not left. He was a loyal and reliable employee of the bank, and they made him a loan to cover the balance of the right price, which of course was something in excess of Mrs. Lindtner's legacy; you could not expect to get the restricted neighborhood, the classy residential district, the paid improvements, and all the rest that had to be seen to

be appreciated for only twenty-five hundred dollars. In a little while thereafter, behold the Stieffels established in their new house with "Mission finish" upstairs and down, richly tinted art-glass in the window over the sideboard, a porch across the front fully six feet wide with massive pillars of make-believe stone that gave an intriguing effect of being constructed out of badly rumped wrapping-paper, with a rubber-plant on the steps, with a blinding white cement side-walk (in and paid for), with a trolley-car thrashing by in either direction every half-minute along the street in front, and with a tract of three or four acres called "the dumps" and used as such in the rear.

The place fulfilled all the promises made for it, particularly in the matter of neighborhood. Mr. Weaver the undertaker had the shingle bungalow next door. "In your hour of bereavement, go to Weaver for sympathetic care. Our prices are the lowest in the city," was on his advertisement-cards in all the street-cars; they were very refined people. The lady on the other side, in the house just like the Stieffels', was in business for herself with a millinery store down town; she was refined too, but naturally had not much time for society, going to and from her work every day like a man. Across the street was a St. Louis flat or "duplex" as some called them, where the tenants moved in and out pretty frequently, no one seeming to stay any length of time; but they were almost always refined. To go on citing everybody up one side of the block and back the other, along the whole extent of Rochester Avenue would be an achievement parallel to the immortal catalogue of the ships — with some differences; but enough has been said to give some idea of the fairly staggering advantages Maplehurst as a

place of residence possessed over the Primrose Flats. Inside the Stieffel house, the contrast was not so marked. There were still the lop-sided stacks of magazines and light-weight literature behind the doors and on the pantry floor, and the attic stairs; babies continued to arrive periodically; and Frank came home with the delicatessen bundles as of old. Leaving him out, the only member of the family who ever did any real work was Nettie; you might hear her shrilling around the house, or in pursuit of the younger children any day and all day after school-hours, clattering the dish-pan, swashing and swishing soap-suds over the floors; as they advanced in wisdom and stature, she got some measure of assistance out of her brothers and sisters, too. She was a general. Mrs. Weaver and the other refined neighbors would come to their doors and windows to witness her dickerings with the vegetable-man, the rag-man, the casual peddler and solicitor. They vowed that Stieffel child was the cutest thing; she'd talk right up to anybody! Mr. Weaver, who was a jolly soul out of business-hours, used to tell a story about her, chuckling with infinite relish over the joke on himself.

“ Say, d'ye know what she said to me the other day? My wife'll never get over it! Why, it was this way: y'know she's very smart at figgers, do any kind of sums in her head quick as lightning — even fractions, hard ones that would make you 'n' me study. Well, the other day I says to her — just for fun, y'know, t' see what she'd do — ‘ Nettie,’ 's I, ‘ If a hen 'n' a half lays 'n' egg 'n' a half in a day 'n' a half, how many would that be in a week 'n' a half?’ I says. Kid answers up right off: ‘ Well, Mr. Weaver,’ she says, ‘ I guess you better get some dub 'n' a half to figger that

out for you!’ she says quick as a flash. Got right back at me like that, quick as a flash!” repeated Mr. Weaver, in unfeigned admiration.

“She’s awful pretty, too. That counts more with a girl than being smart,” his wife would add with an unconscious sigh; the undertaking couple had no children.

The gift of beauty, however, was one which Nettie did not value over much in herself or anybody else; on the other hand, she was prodigiously vain of being smart, always at the top of the class, and bringing home report-cards whereon no grade fell below the nineties. It was her Aunt Julia who revelled in her good looks; the queue of devoted small boys who trailed after Nettie with chewing-gum, with all-day-suckers, with offers to carry her books, to fasten on her skates, to ride her on their bicycles filled Julia with vicarious delight, whereas Nettie herself was frankly bored to the uttermost limits. To be sure, she liked to issue commands and see these swains fetch and carry; but any lugging in of sentimentalities seemed to her silly — the very abyss of silliness. It never occurred to her to play off one boy against another and so get more out of each one of them; the youngster had not the slightest instinct of coquetry, and moreover she was tactlessly and rigidly honest. The only boy for whom she ever betrayed any preference was one Jim Marvin, a rather rough, loud, swaggering young gentleman some two or three years older, and not a native of Maplehurst; he came, sad to say, from a quarter much less refined, verging on the slums, in fact, and had the manners of his degree. Perhaps that was what attracted Nettie and subdued her; for all her independence, she was feminine enough to see a cer-



tain splendor in brutality. They played together on almost equal terms; and once Jim led her to felonious explorations in the grounds of an old house that stood on the outskirts of the dumps and represented indeed that classy residential district about which we have heard. The children crawled through a hole in the back fence, and Jim was about to appropriate some green apples from a few old orchard trees, when Vested Rights appeared in the person of another boy, a boy who evidently belonged there. He was not so big as Jim, and did not make any threatening demonstrations, nevertheless the pirate fled incontinently, leaving Nettie to get out of it as best she might. Personal courage is so handsome a quality that one cannot withhold applause at her exhibition of it, even in these discreditable circumstances; she retreated also, retreated expeditiously, but in good order, even turning to make a face at the lawful heir to the apples. He followed to the hole and called after them, but Jim was already in headlong flight across the dumps; Nettie, who was a fleet runner, had all she could do to keep up with him.

“Who lives in the old house back of here? The one with the big yard all around it?” she asked that evening at supper. It was not long after the move, while they felt still a little strange to Maplehurst.

“Somebody named McQuair, I heard,” her father said.

“McQuair?” said Aunt Julia. “Is it an old lady? I wouldn’t wonder if that was her we made a coat for; she was one of that regular North Hill crowd. Kinda dressy old lady, Nettie, with real pretty crinkly gray hair? Pretty for gray hair, I mean. Is that her?”

"I don't know. I ain't seen her. I was just wondering who lived there," said Nettie, prudently non-committal. She might have told on herself, but never on Jim.

Her aunt Julia was living with them now — boarding with them to help out. Those were Julia's prosperous days, and it may be imagined that she did help out liberally, not only with board-money but with a thousand other services; her unremitting industry, though a daily spectacle, stirred Mrs. Maggie to the same frightened wonder as at the outset of their acquaintance. "Julia can just do *everything!*" she was still telling their world when it became calamitously apparent that Julia could not do everything.

Her troubles dated from the day she left Fritsch to carry out a cherished ambition by setting up for herself. Prospects were brilliant at first; three of Fritsch's best girls went with her; numbers of his patrons promised their custom; her credit was good at all the shops; she had three rooms nicely fitted up, a stock of materials in the best taste, all the latest modes and ideas — then what on earth was the matter? Nobody knows. It was as if written on the scrolls of Fate that Julia Stieffel was not to succeed. She was a steam-engine for work herself, but alas, she could not impart the steam-engine disposition to her underlings; one by one they drifted off to be replaced by others of varying degrees of incompetence who likewise were forever drifting off. It was a procession. The customers came and went after much the same fashion; some were satisfied, some dissatisfied; they rang the changes on prompt pay, slow pay, no pay at all. Poor Julia, who always knew her own mind, could not cope with their caprices; their negli-

gence smacked to her of dishonesty, yet their actual dishonesty she could not believe, though imposed on time and time again. The experience bewildered without teaching her; she could not make out why it was that everything went wrong. Fritsch had never seemed to have so much trouble; one would have thought his shop ran itself; of course some of the girls left now and then, and there were always new ones being broken in; and she remembered costly mishaps, costumes returned, difficult ladies, hopeless bills. But Fritsch kept his head triumphantly above water, and here she was sinking, sinking. The whole unlucky adventure was over inside of eighteen months; Julia went on the rocks with all her savings; she did not salvage even a single sewing-machine. All was lost except the un-lose-able, her superlative skill and knowledge of her trade. But lo, good forewomen and skirt-makers, the very people whom Julia never could find to work for *her*, were now as thick as hops! Fritsch had one, everybody had one; she trudged from one modiste to another until she was weary; and at last had to fall back on seamstressing at two dollars a day — a dismal come-down, but half a loaf is better than no bread.

Even this catastrophe could not shake Maggie's faith in her. "Poor Julia did have the worst luck!" was the burden of her comment. "You wouldn't believe how mean some people are — real dishonorable, *I* call it. How was she to know they wouldn't pay her? They all looked like they had plenty of money; I suppose that's how they happen to have it — just never paying anybody. And then some of the stores were so mean, too. If she'd been a man, they wouldn't have dared treat her so; but they all pick on any

woman that's out for herself, you know because they know they *can*. I was reading a piece about that very thing in *Hearts and Homes*, the last number. 'The Tyranny of Sex,' it was called. If I can find it, I'll send one of the children over with it, Mis' Duncan. You'd be interested."

"Of course Mis' Duncan don't know a thing about it — I don't think! And her in the hat trade all her life!" Julia would add, grumpily sarcastic. But in her heart of hearts, the other's dog-like championship warmed and strengthened her. Julia knew — she could not help knowing — that her brother's wife had the intelligence of a hen, and a character which, for such qualities as determination, industry and perseverance, was not even to be compared to a hen's; but Maggie believed in her. And who is there so strong, that he does not crave somebody's belief, be it only a weakling's?

The Stieffels, on the whole, got along pretty well. Frank's salary was not more than enough but they lived on it; the children were healthy and good; Julia was not the sort of boarder to add to their expenses — if, in fact, she did not actually lessen them; she was seldom out of work and never idle even in her slack time, sewing for the family, taking a hand at the range or the ironing-table. It was a happy household and so large that the addition of another member, as in the case of the Aymar child, made no appreciable difference. Frank was really responsible for that, though he used to say that his wife worried about her cousin's little girl, an orphan, alone in the world; the truth was that he himself worried. Maggie Stieffel never worried about her own children, let alone other peoples'! "It don't seem right. Just think how

Mattie would feel, if she knew — and maybe she does know,” he said, his good, tired, patient face screwed into new wrinkles of care and anxiety. “And here we’ve got a home, and plenty of room. Seems as if we could stick her in *somewhere* —”

It ended by his making the California journey to get her, Maggie acquiescing readily enough. There was something eminently gracious, romantic and becoming about their rescuing pose; she bragged a little, harmlessly. “Oh, no, we don’t *have* to, we just feel that we’d *like* to. No, she isn’t hardly a relation; her mother was a cousin of mine, that’s as near as it comes. But you know what kind of a place the world is for a girl alone, with snares and all kinds of *men* — you know what men are!” said Mrs. Frank in tones of dark significance. And it gave her an agreeable sensation of opulence to note the impression made by the statement that Mr. Stieffel had simply made up his mind to let business go for a few weeks while he went out to the Coast to get the child — he thought that was the higher duty, Maggie said, borrowing from *Hearts and Homes* again.

## II

**T**HE old McQuair homestead was situated at the top of the rise to the north of Adams Road, overlooking the suburb of Maplehurst. With us, any house which has harbored the same family for as much as a quarter of a century automatically becomes an old homestead with all that phrase implies of stability and sentimental tradition; but custom apart, this one had a fair claim to its title, having been built as far back as eighteen-thirty by the great-grandfather of the present generation, and lived in by some one of the name ever since. In Judge Alexander McQuair's day, the North Hill was all farms and maple woods, traversed only by the road to Adamstown, an older settlement than the city itself; the judge considered himself to be establishing a home in the country, and wrote elegantly about his orchards and bee-hives in Latin verse modeled on the "Eclogues," which had been hammered into him in youth at the Scotch University where he was educated; he was a Scot by birth, but came to this country while yet a young man. Nowadays that whole North Hill locality is built up all the way to Adamstown with suburban residences which ere long will be old homesteads, too; the cow-pastures and leafy lanes that Alexander knew are no longer within the memory of even the oldest inhabitant, and the very trees from which Maplehurst took its name have all but disappeared. They began to die off, such as were not cut

down outright to make way for sewers and sidewalks, soon after the subdivision was opened; so that by the time Master Randon McQuair, at the age of eight or thereabouts, came to live in his ancestral domain there were only three or four well-preserved and vigorous specimens left, all of them on the lawn in front of the old house.

The little boy was much interested by these fine, tall, upstanding trees, the like of which he could not remember to have seen before, although trees in plenty as well as other vegetable forms of many outlandish kinds had entered into his experience. Canadian pines, palms in Cuba, cactus and maguey, the limes, plane-trees and poplars of European cities had in their turns been familiar to Ranny, though he could scarcely have assigned them severally to their proper zones; they all throve together in the jungle of his memories. As for homesteads, old or new, Randon's mental landscape had never been claimed or staked out, so to speak; for more than a few months or perhaps weeks at a time; he had lived in a log cabin on Cripple Creek; he had lived in a great old stone mausoleum with a patio and fountain at the corner of the Avenida Porfirio Diaz; he had lived in an Adirondack bungalow; he had lived everywhere except in this square brick house with the maples shadowing the lawn, and the gravel drive winding up through the old shrubbery, and the octagonal lattice kiosk over the ancient dis-used well and pump. He sat very upright in the carriage, craning and peering in every direction until his eyes ached, and also sniffing with his small nose unaccustomed odors. It was the afternoon of a summer day, and the grass had been lately cut, and gave forth a pleasant fragrance conquering the city dust

and coal-smoke. The trolley-cars went grinding along Adams Road at the foot of the hill, at every opening amongst the bushes the uniform roofs of Maplehurst could be seen threateningly near, yet here within the confines of an ordinary city lot there was to be felt a kind of determined privacy; the place sat civilly aloof like a gentlewoman who should find herself by some untoward chance shut in with a mob of lackeys.

Randon had somehow understood quite clearly, though nobody had explained it to him in so many words, that this was the end of the journey. About all the other stops he had been conscious of a transient or temporary feeling, though, for aught he had been told to the contrary, any one of them might have been the "home" which he once or twice overheard his father speak of as their destination. The word did not mean much to this small Ulysses. He knew that they were going to meet a lady who lived there, but who she was did not greatly interest him. In Ranny's eight-year-old universe, grown people were only of importance as being the governing body; they were all, without distinction, immeasurably old, and looked as like as peas, except for individual idiosyncrasies about skirts and trousers. He had been presented to numbers of them recently with the meaningless information that this was his Aunt Margaret, his Cousin Dorothy, his other cousin little Dorothy, his big Cousin John. They all did the same things, i. e. the skirted cousins kissed him — horror! — and sighed and made one or two remarks, either how much he looked like poor Louise, or that he was McQuair all over; the trousers shook his hand decently enough, and said, was this Randon? After which ceremonies it was generally suggested that he go and look at the



garden or the goldfish or what-not and somebody was told off to accompany him, another child if there happened to be one in the household, if not, some skirted or trousered grown-up whom Randy instinctively divined to be more or less bored by the duty. He was a rather silent little chap, and in these last circumstances would become more silent than ever, obeying carefully and trying to find out what was expected of him in the way of behavior, with some vague idea of being as little trouble as possible. Everybody seemed to live in large, cushion-y houses; there were endless bells, and a correspondingly endless number of stiff, starched, quiet women to answer them — women who carried trays, and said “Madame” to the cousins with skirts and to himself “Master Randon”; on his father’s orders, he used to give sums of money to them in a private and underhand manner. In some of the houses there were also large, shaven personages who wore black clothes and white shirts such as his father put on in the evening; but they had theirs on all day long, and they waited on table; one called them John or James but the last name was invariably Butler. Everywhere there would be some grown-up who would call Randy to the front before the rest and ask him what he meant to do when he got to be a man? Was he going to be an engineer and build bridges and railroads like papa? Ranny who was honest and not particularly quick-witted, never could think of an answer wherewith to appease this well-intentioned curiosity; he would not say that he wanted to be an engineer like papa because it would not have been the truth, and on the other hand he shrank from divulging his ambitions in the pirate line because another of his sure instincts

warned him that his elders would laugh. He could only wriggle or stand sheepishly dumb under the inquiry; and presently they would forget all about him, and he would be allowed to slink away unmolested.

The carriage halted. "Here we are!" said his father; and he got down and lifted Randon over the wheel, and turned to pay the driver. It was a livery vehicle; the coach-house and stables to be seen aligned in the offing, though part of the original equipment of the old McQuair homestead, had long been unoccupied. A lady came to the door — *the* lady, as Randon felt assured the instant he saw her. The boy took off his hat in a sedate and decorous little manner he had which some of the grown-ups had appeared to find highly diverting; this one smiled, too, but conventionally as if he were as grown-up as herself, and said "How do you do?" holding out her hand. They shook hands, eyeing each other over frankly.

The lady, as Randon came to know a good while later when both of them looked back to this first meeting with amusement, was at this time fifty-five or so — that is, about fifteen years older than his own father; but she might have been a hundred and fifty-five for all the distinction Randy made. They were all Methuselahs to him. She had thick gray hair, not very many wrinkles, dark eyes, a small, trim, sprightly figure. At the sound of her voice his father turned; and she exchanged with him the same greeting in the same style of cool and civil friendliness. It touched the pinnacle of good taste in the opinion of the youngest actor in the scene, though he would scarcely have expressed his approbation in that flight of metaphor — no kissing, no embarrassing sentimen-

tal observances whatsoever. In after years, Randon used to aver that he began to like Mrs. Hector McQuair from that moment.

He found out almost immediately that she was Mrs. Hector McQuair, though he made no effort that way, being perfectly content to take her for granted, with a name or without one, as children take their elders. The hackman drove off, and they took their valises and followed her into the dim, high-ceilinged old hall; and it was then that the lady herself said, looking quickly at his father: "Does Randon know who I am? Have you ever told him?"

"Why, no. It didn't seem necessary. He's not old enough yet to understand. After a while, of course —"

"Oh, I think we'd better start straight and all open and above-board, hadn't we?" she said with an anxiety which she herself seemed to find a little funny. "Even if he doesn't understand —" And bending down to him and speaking very carefully and distinctly, she said: "I am Mrs. Hector McQuair, Randon. You know who your grandfather was? Hector McQuair?"

"Yes," said the boy soberly attentive.

"Well, I'm his wife — his widow. I'm not your grandmother, though, because I'm not Papa's mother — I'm just his step-mother. That's not the same thing, you know. It's — er — it's —"

"I thought you'd have some trouble explaining," said McQuair senior not without amusement, as she hesitated, trying to choose the right words. "Might as well give it up. You don't understand, do you Randy?"

"No," said Randon honestly; "but it's all right!"

he added, being of a generous disposition and anxious to oblige her — at which kind assurance both the older people began to laugh.

“I suppose he’d better call me ‘Mrs. McQuair’?” said the lady questioningly again.

“Well, that’s rather a mouthful — might sound queer to outsiders — I thought of ‘Aunt Virginia’ —?” said the other, hesitating now in his turn.

She repeated “Aunt Virginia” drawing her brows slightly. “But that would make the relationship harder to explain than ever when he *is* old enough to understand. No, let it be ‘Mrs. McQuair.’ Then when he grows up he won’t find himself on an awkward footing of intimacy, supposing he — well, supposing he doesn’t particularly care about being intimate. Oh, such things have happened, you know, Aleck,” she said, as her stepson made a movement of dissent.

Randon’s father said something with a kind of embarrassed vehemence about their “getting along together all right.” “You’ll find him a pretty good sort of a boy as boys go. I don’t believe he’ll give you much trouble,” he said anxiously. “And he’s sure to like you. You’ll get along with him all right. You always do with everybody.”

“Well, I don’t know a thing in the world about small boys — however, we’re probably even there. He doesn’t know a thing in the world about old ladies!” said Mrs. McQuair again with that vanishing air of having a private laugh at her own expense. “Dear me, how much the poor child has to learn!”

In fact, Master Randon did forthwith begin to acquire information at a great rate of a kind which hitherto no one had thought it worth while or perhaps

found it possible to impart to him. As that this was his home because it had been his father's and his grandfather's and his great-grandfather's before him; he was to live there with Mrs. McQuair, and go to school and grow up. No more come-by-chance roosts for a while here, a while there, then up stakes and away again; Papa would still pursue those courses, but he, Randon, would be stationary. He would have his own money, and he must learn how to take care of it, and how to go and get it at the bank where it would be kept. There was a room which would always be his, a place at the table where he would always sit. Though all this indicated a way of life radically different from that he had lived so far, which grievous to relate, had been pretty haphazard as regarded beds, meals, lessons and many other items, Randy accepted the prospect phlegmatically. His experience had been too wide and varied for any change to affect him much.

It was a big house, like the others he had seen, with not quite so many ornamental breakables about, however, so that one might go free and fearlessly; indeed, the furnishings were in so massive a style that a small boy, even had he been much more viciously inclined than Randy, could scarcely have prevailed against them — majestic four-post beds, great cavernous wardrobes, sofas of immovably weighty appearance with griffins and horns-of-plenty carved all over them, whole herds of straight-backed mahogany side-chairs headed by a bell-wether of an arm-chair. Nothing had been changed since Judge McQuair's day; there was a ghastly marble bust of the old gentleman in his stock and ruffles mounted on a pedestal in one corner of the front parlor. Randon was duly in-

troduced to it, as also to the oil-portrait of Mrs. Alexander simpering near by in a circular gilt frame, with a turban and bird-of-paradise plume on her head. "He can't make much out of them now, but as he goes along, he'll be more interested," the lady said. "I'll talk to him about them."

His father nodded. "Yes, that's what I want. I want him to grow up with his people, and to have a tradition — something to hark back to, you know."

Upstairs Mrs. McQuair threw open a door at the end of the hall, and showed Randon that room that was to be his; it was only a little room, with one window giving on a cramped iron balcony over the front door, a clematis vine twining in and out of the rusted iron railings which were none too secure, having been there since Judge Alexander, too. In the room there was fresh white matting on the floor, but the high chest of drawers and the bedstead with head and foot pieces made up of countless slender spindles, and the wooden chair painted black with gilt stencillings and the wall-paper figured with little symmetrical blue and cherry-colored roses and green leaves and branches and crested birds — all these must have been there aforetime, Randon argued, from his father's exclamation of recognition as he stepped within.

"Hello!" he said, "why, it's just the same!" He gazed all about eagerly, surprised and touched and pleased, then turned on Mrs. Hector a look in which some older and more discerning witness than Randy might have read appreciation and a certain admiration and warm regard. "It was like you to do this."

"I thought you might like him to have it. And I've never changed anything in the house, you know,

anyhow," she said simply. "This was Papa's room when he was at home — when he was a little boy like you, Randy," she told the open-eyed youngster.

"There're exactly two hundred and sixty-nine birds on the north wall opposite the bed. I've counted 'em many a time," said Randon's father. "And here's the same old brass candlestick on the table. Look, Ranny, you pushed the candle up with this thumb-piece, as fast as it melted — only you didn't! Because the wax always ran down and stuck the thumb-piece tight in the slot. I drew a skull and cross-bones and my initials with red ink in the bottom of the table-drawer — and by George, here they are still!"

"They wouldn't come out with the hardest kind of scrubbing," Mrs. McQuair said. They went on talking while Randon cruised around the room, examining everything, but at a safe distance, respectfully. Had he been a little girl, a pleasurable sense of ownership might have developed within him; but the male animal seems to be naturally foot-loose, in youth at any rate. After a while, Mrs. McQuair who possessed some faculty for seeing without the least appearance of watching, asked him kindly if he liked it?

"It's very nice," said Randon, politely. "I don't know much about rooms like this. Who is the picture of the lady of?"

He had discovered it in a small easel of silvered metal on top of a frame of book-shelves across one corner of the room — a photograph of somebody in a light dress with a wreath of flowers and a veil on her head. The others looked from him to the picture and then at each other for a silent moment.

"I put it there for him on purpose, of course.

There didn't happen to be any good one of you — just one or two taken when you were at college, and he wouldn't have known they were you," said the lady finally. "But doesn't he remember her?"

The father shook his head. "Not any more, I'm afraid. Two years, you know. That's a long time in a child's life," he said with a brief sigh. "It's Mother, Ranny. You remember Mother?"

"Oh, yes," said the boy confidently. "I remember her. She's dead. She used to be on the bed all the time, and Conchita fanned her; and then she died one day. She didn't look like that picture, though. Is that her?"

Neither of them answered for an instant, and something about the silence or in their faces troubled and puzzled him. "Say *she*, Randy — say: 'Is that she?' — not *her*," Mrs. McQuair said at last in a mechanical voice and utterance, and Randon obediently repeated "she," supposing that error in his speech to have shocked them.

"We were in Gaudalajara when it happened — you knew that, though. Conchita must have been some maid we had. I never know their names, but Randy has had more to do with them, of course," Aleck McQuair said, with another sigh.

After this Randon rather expected the invitation to go out and see the garden which, sure enough, was presently issued. But this time nobody went along to guide him; instead Mrs. McQuair took him to the back of the house into a cross-hall with oil-coth on the floor, and an umbrella-stand holding in place of umbrellas a spade and a short-handled rake, the latter with an old battered straw hat and a pair of old soiled cotton gloves draped upon its tines. There was



a door with the upper panels filled with glass; it was cool and dark as a well in this passage-way, but with the opening of the door there came a gush of afternoon sunshine, warm outside air, and the weedy, dusty, spicy odors he had smelled before. By a stone step or two one descended to a venerable brick walk, uneven, with a green rime of mold here and there, and weeds sprouting in the cracks; a great weigelia bush shaded the corner with high-arching branches that in the spring would be wands of delicately brilliant bloom, and other shrubs forming an irregular hedge followed the path round a curve and out of sight. The opposing side of it was guarded by a tall board fence.

“You’ll have to find your way around by yourself,” said Mrs. McQuair. “But you can’t very easily get lost. That’s the outside fence. You don’t mind my not going with you?” she asked in her agreeable manner exactly as if he had been her own age, or at least as fully grown up — nothing patronizing, nothing superior, nothing domineering about it. Randon hastened to assure her warmly that that was all right, he didn’t want her at all!

In truth he very much liked being allowed thus to take care of himself and ramble at will. The walk led him to a potato-patch with outlying beds of tomatoes, tent-like erections for climbing beans, half a dozen rows of sugar-corn, and so on — the kitchen-garden, in short, framed with currant and raspberry bushes. Farther on the bricks spread into a tiny paved esplanade with a bench shadowed by an arbor of grape-vines; beyond it the shrubs were succeeded by a file of aged apple-trees set regularly in smooth grass. Randy who had been playing that he was an Indian scout, emerging from cover, halted abruptly, not that

a scoutish sixth sense had warned him, but because with no more than the five senses of ordinary mortals he was aware of the neighborhood of others, friends or enemies, to wit: a little girl and a bigger boy whom he both saw and heard scurrying off to a hole in the fence where one of the boards had fallen out, at top speed. They reached it, tumbled through, vanished, leaving an impression of scratched bare legs, apple-cores, unkempt hair, semi-rowdyism. Randon, however, was not squeamish; to him, even if interlopers poaching on the orchard, they were still other children, creatures of his own age and world. He uttered an amicable "Hi! Say —!" and ran to the opening and stuck his head through, but only just in time to behold them escaping, pell-mell, with squeals and giggles. The little girl turned around at the corner and made a most spirited face at him, her tongue out and black eyes snapping. Randy stared after her and up and down. It was an alley, unpaved, littered with tin cans, noisome rags and broken crockery; venturing cautiously a little way down it in the wake of the banditti, he discovered that it ended in a field and hollow which provided dumping-ground for a still larger and more varied assortment of rubbish. Paths crossed it in two or three directions, and on the farther side there were the backyards and rear elevations of a row of small houses facing a made street. The place engaged one's interest, but Randon decided that for the present at least it had better be let alone; it seemed somehow to the youngster that he had made a wordless pact with Mrs. McQuair to stay within bounds.

That night they had dinner in a high, wide, dim room with candles on the table, and courses in the

prescribed sequence, just as in the other big houses. Randon's father came down in the black clothes about which he always made jokes, saying that they were ten years out of date and that he looked like Brer Tambourine or Mistah Bones — personages whom Randy was quite sure he had never met in all his sojournings, though he kept a look-out for them wherever black coats were assembled. He himself had to put on his little best suit, one of the maids good-naturedly helping with the cuff-buttons and tie; she insisted on brushing his hair, too, to his private disgust, though he chivalrously suffered it and thanked her afterwards. Mrs. McQuair wore a thin gray dress matching her gray hair, so that she seemed to be all gray, and exquisitely cool. The long windows reaching to the floor in the dining-room were raised, and one could see out onto the porch and down the lawn to the flower-garden; and as the twilight deepened, little lights came pricking out in lines and clusters all over the shadowy distance. Randon thought this was beautiful; and it was with amazement that he heard his father expressing precisely the contrary opinion in vigorous distaste.

“The subdivision is getting pretty close — too close altogether!” he said. “Wherever you look it crowds in. We're an island. It's a shame our poor old place has to be so spoiled.”

“Everybody says the property all around here has got too valuable to be held unimproved any longer,” Mrs. McQuair said.

“Oh yes, of course. You'd be eaten up with taxes and assessments. But *improved* —! Well, I suppose from a contractor's point of view it's an improvement to cram twenty cheap jerry-built little coops on

a piece of ground not big enough for one decent house, and get them all rented or sold. That's the extraordinary thing: they find people willing to live in them!" said Mr. McQuair with a look of wonder. "As we came along to-day, I noticed all those Maplehurst houses are occupied. To be sure, they all have yards and a porch — but otherwise for all the privacy about them, one might as well be in a tenement. The people can't care anything about privacy, though — don't want to be private, probably. They'd think it lonesome! You and I, now — why, our notion of a home is being off to ourselves where we don't have to see or hear or come in any sort of contact with other people unless we choose. As long as I've been knocking around, I've never got over that feeling." He paused, gazing out of the window with a slight frown, absently drumming on the table. "Do they ever annoy you?"

"Who? The subdivisionites? Oh, no," said the lady, tolerantly. "Occasional raids on the apple-trees by the children. I thought at first they were dreadful little toughs, but then I reflected that the same crime has been committed time out of mind since Adam and Mrs. Adam first got into trouble, and set the bad example. Boys, you know —! Your own record is stainless, of course —"

"Of course!" Randy's father assented, grinning.

"It seems to be a settlement of very nice plain people — small clerks, travelling-men, public-school teachers — people like that, you know. My sewing-woman lives over there somewhere. They all start off to work in the mornings and come home at evening in hordes. There isn't a saloon in the place; two or three churches, Methodist and Catholic mis-

sions. That gives you an idea of it. Everybody is thoroughly respectable. I daresay there are grades among them; some of them are probably not considered equals by the others —” she smiled and shrugged. “That seems absurd in a country where, theoretically, one person is just as good as another.”

“That ‘theoretically’ is well put in.”

“Why, I might have said ‘actually,’ Aleck. If any foreigner were to ask me who constituted Society in this country, I should simply have to tell him everybody that was out of jail!”

She made this statement with every appearance of seriousness; and young Mr. Randon McQuair, needless to say, had not the dimmest idea of what she was talking about; indeed, he was earnestly occupied at the moment with a dish of corn and green peppers baked together that transcended anything in his experience. As for the older McQuair, he laughed outright, and Randy, glancing up at this merriment, caught the same look on her face that it seemed to wear so often, that look as if she were laughing to herself and partly at herself. She saw the little boy eyeing her with his grave questioning and measuring survey of a child, and spoke to him: “Well, Randon —?”

“I think I am going to like it here,” said Randon soberly.

### III

**N**O more ceremonies attended the introduction of the youthful hero, Mr. Randon McQuair, to the halls of his ancestors. The very next morning he woke up feeling as if he had lived all his life in the room with the two hundred-and-odd birds on its north wall, and had never slept out of the spindled bed. To be sure the youngster was accustomed to change and not difficult about accommodations; as has been said, he had never stayed long enough anywhere to form attachments to an environment or set of people, so he missed nobody and suffered from no sensation of strangeness or lonesomeness. As time went on, when warm-hearted persons expended sentiment upon him, Randy used to squirm under it much more annoyed and perplexed and humiliated by the unmerited sympathy than he would have been by, let us say unmerited neglect or reproof. Poor, lonely, motherless, little boy, indeed! He was all right; or if ever he wasn't all right it was his own look-out; he could take care of himself. And what was the matter with his home, or with Mrs. McQuair? Weren't they all right too? Well, then —?

In after years when he came to be a better judge, he gave Mrs. McQuair more credit than was really due her — so, at least, she would say with her inveterate air of poking dry fun equally at the world and herself — for creating and maintaining a domestic

atmosphere wherein everybody was invariably at home and at ease. Life in the old house was cheerful, democratic, unrestricted, yet all the while governed by a gracious propriety; simplicity, good taste and good manners seemed native to it, and physical comfort merely incidental, achieved without effort. No one was ever seen to work too hard, nobody apparently was ever put to any trouble; the whole machinery of housekeeping functioned out of sight, smoothly, noiselessly and one would have said without guidance. Even the introduction of so uneasy an element as a small boy could not disarrange it; the lady of the house was not only capable of "getting along with anybody" as her stepson had remarked, she could magically impart that faculty to others.

Mrs. Hector McQuair had had the opportunity to demonstrate her gift for some years during her husband's lifetime. The late Doctor McQuair, at past middle-age, with a family of grown children all of whom, unlike little Ranny, recollected their mother — Aleck, the youngest, was fifteen or so when she died — Doctor McQuair, I say, performed the well-nigh unheard-of feat of making a perfectly sensible and suitable second marriage, to which no one, least of all the younger McQuairs themselves, ever found the slightest objection. Miss Virginia Carey, though nowhere near the doctor's age, was no light-headed, pretty young thing of the stripe to whom well-to-do elderly gentlemen so frequently succumb, according to popular belief, that is. She must have reached her thirty-fifth year, had some money of her own, came of a well-known family, and had been considered a settled old maid — though not, it was reported, for lack of "chances"; she was not unattractive, and a

good many men, first and last, had been significantly attentive to her. People did not speak of her as a bright woman, and as she never said or did anything conspicuously original or interesting, perhaps she was not particularly bright; she was only able to "get along with everybody." She took over the management of the doctor's household without giving offense to a single one of its members; the fact that the two McQuair daughters were both married with homes of their own may have had something to do with their complacency, but as for the sons, beginning with a civil indifference, they ended with hearty liking! She made a man so comfortable; she always listened to his stories, and laughed at his jokes; she never asked either too many or too few questions, never insisted, never bullied, never, *never* wept. One by one they married, and — excepting Aleck whose profession took him too far afield — they used to bring their wives and the grandchildren back to the old house on visits which were always successful and always happily remembered. However Mrs. Hector did it, she must have done it superlatively well; for it is the solemn truth that after the old doctor died — he got to be pretty feeble and was a good deal of a care, although his mind was clear and active as ever up to the last — not one of the family had anything to say against his disposition of the property, though he left her considerably more than what would have been legally a widow's portion. That was a vindication, if you like! Though in justice it should be said that the McQuairs were a good stock, kindly, intelligent, right-minded men and women; they would have shrunk from any ignoble squabble over it, even if the old gentleman's will had been injuriously un-



fair. They kept up pleasant relations with the widow, making visits every now and then as in their father's lifetime; and when some two years after poor Louise McQuair's death down there in Guadalajara, Aleck brought his little boy back to the States to be educated and taken care of, it seemed entirely natural that he should apply to the quasi-grandmother.

"Any of us would be glad to have the child," the brothers and sisters said — and they meant it; the McQuairs, I repeat were nice people, salt-of-the-earth people. "But Aleck wants him brought up in the old home where we were all of us born. And you know what Mrs. McQuair is; Randon couldn't be with anybody that would be lovelier to him, or have a better influence over him."

They all called her Mrs. McQuair, and Randon himself never addressed her in any more informal fashion, not even when he grew old enough to make that choice about intimacy which she had forseen at their first meeting. But, by that time, in so far as a name stands for anything at all, "Mrs. McQuair" denoted for Randon as much affectionate familiarity as the most endearing term that ever was coined; he would have indignantly rejected "Grandma," on the ground that his Mrs. McQuair was not like a "grandma," not like those of his observation anyhow, the actual grandmas appertaining to other boys. They couldn't hold a candle to her! He was very fond of her in a boy's reticent way; an observer would have been hard put to it to understand why, since it was certainly not for the reasons commonly assigned. She was kindness itself, but she never "mothered" the lad. When Randon had the measles, it was not Mrs. McQuair who took care of him; she sent for a trained

nurse. And the other time, the time he fell out of one of those same famous apple-trees and broke his leg, she got to the spot and rendered prompt, gentle and efficacious relief—but afterwards she had another trained nurse. She did not pet the little boy, but neither did she tease or hector him; she listened to everything he had to say, and was always ready with a laugh in the right place exactly as with his father before him.

“. . . We get along together wonderfully well,” she wrote to Alexander McQuair in one of her weekly bulletins. “I don’t make a fuss over him, as I have an idea that children really don’t like having a fuss made over them—healthy, unspoiled, normal children, I mean; at any rate, they should, in conscience, be allowed a choice in the matter. We grown people are quick enough to let it be known when we want to be fussed over and when not; why shouldn’t a child have the same freedom? Why should we force our attentions on a child because he is a child and can’t evade us? Live and let live. I remember hating to be kissed by anybody and everybody when I was Randon’s age. . . . I think, if people would make a success of living together, to be just is more important than to be affectionate. Good intentions won’t always serve; they sometimes go so terribly astray. There’s that old saying, you know, about Hell being paved with them. I used to suppose that meant broken promises and so on. I know now it’s the ones that are kept! . . . We had better not be in such a hurry to be kind as to forget to be polite; but one doesn’t always realize that being polite takes a formidable exertion of the mind. The trouble is one can’t be polite four days in the week, or to-morrow

morning at half-past ten; one must be polite all the time to be really effective — to ‘get results’ as you say. With a little boy, the necessity for setting an example of politeness is bewilderingly mixed-up with the counter necessity for laying down the law occasionally. However, Randon is reasonable, and I try not to be arbitrary. He came to me the other day with a request to have another boy to play with him. I said yes. ‘But’ said I, ‘Randon, you know those problems in the arithmetic where you start with a number and multiply and it keeps piling up at a certain rate? If one bushel of corn will make four pounds of meal, then two bushels equal eight pounds of meal, and so on —?’

“He listened, eyeing me shrewdly. ‘You’re laughing,’ he said, nodding his funny little wise head. ‘But I don’t mind. You’re always laughing to yourself. Go ahead! If two bushels —?’”

“‘We’ll say “boys” instead of bushels,’ said I. ‘If one boy equals two boys, then two boys equal —?’”

“‘Four boys?’ says the youngster, puzzled but with a grin dawning. He is sharp enough, and I think already had some idea of what I was driving at.

“‘No,’ said I solemnly. ‘That’s just the curious mathematical truth I want to show you. If one boy equals two boys, then two boys equal ten boys; and ten boys presently equal fifty boys, and fifty boys —’”

“But he wouldn’t let me get any farther! ‘Aw, say, there won’t be *that* many,’ he protested. ‘I won’t let ’em come — not *that* many anyhow. Aw, say —!’ So, of course, I capitulated; and I’m sure there were not more than fifteen boys, and they all behaved very well!”

Randon was probably about ten at this time, or so

he guessed on finding the letter years after amongst some old papers of his father's; it was undated, a fact not without precedent in a lady's correspondence. He laughed, remembering the occurrence very well. However, it was not the first occasion on which he had had a boy to play with him; from the beginning Mrs. McQuair was singularly open-minded on that point, or seemed so, in comparison with other boys' feminine autocrats. Randy might ask whomsoever he fancied, and they might do almost anything they chose, except mistreat animals or the flower-garden — reasonable inhibitions, and readily understood by any ordinarily decent and manly boy. "I don't make any inquiries about their names and families," she confessed in another letter. "If he were a girl, one would have to be more careful; but boys will be democratic, whatever! He has made a number of friends at school, and I believe his chief chum is our night-watchman's son! To me they all look a good deal alike, plebeian or patrician; I can't tell them apart. Naturally I do not linger long in their society; it's only too evident that I'm a terrific damper on their activities, whether of sport or council. They are mostly stocky little chaps, always lacking a front tooth or a back tooth or a tooth somewhere, and able to produce remarkable symphonic variations on any theme by whistling or blowing or squeaking through the temporary gap. They have theories on the subject of washing — or *not* washing — and on dress, and on going to Sunday-school or dancing-school, and on what is suitable to be carried in one's pockets, which appear to me revolutionary, but Randy shares them, so I daresay they are the average boy's. . . . You were asking who his associates were and I have

now revealed that I don't know much about them! That may seem criminally careless — but did your mother know all about yours? Randon's haven't led him into evil yet, anyhow; he doesn't seem to me to be that kind of boy that would be led or driven either; much more likely to get into trouble on some headlong impulse of his own, I imagine. . . . I've often wondered what I would do if I caught him in an untruth; I don't know; I'm afraid I wouldn't do anything. I think — that is, I *hope* — he hasn't much temptation to be other than honest with me; he has never shown the least fear of me; on the contrary we are such good friends that I don't believe he would hesitate to tell me even something damaging, provided I *had* to be told! One doesn't always have to tell everything one knows, and least said, soonest mended is in many cases a good rule to go by, you know. . . . As for his little girl associates, there aren't any, I am not at all sorry to report. He hasn't yet reached the age when they begin to notice the petticoats. . . .”

Whatever her letters may betray of Mrs. McQuair's own character, they indicate a tolerably accurate estimate of Randon's; he was without doubt a fair sample of the American boy. He did well in school, and was liked by his fellows amongst whom, however, he never became a leader; the qualities well-known yet impossible of definition which make for leadership were not in him. It was true a certain popularity accrued to him from his place of residence, the roomy old house and grounds in combination with their miraculously lenient chatelaine, holding out many attractions. Moreover, it was handy to “the dumps” where the youth of the vicinity had a makeshift base-

ball field, and used besides to set up their circuses, gypsy encampments, Wild West dramas, and so forth, no one objecting to their activities in that derelict territory. In fact, the Maplehurst mothers whose homes were adjacent looked upon it as directly planned and located by Providence to keep the boys harmlessly busy within sight and hearing. Not one of the city parks could furnish such varied and enduring entertainment. Anything on this turning globe that a boy needed for any sort of experiment or in any construction, trap, cage, machine, vehicle, toy or weapon, could be found on the dumps; he had but to step out of his own back-door, or in Ranny McQuair's case, to drop through the hole in the fence, and lo, an Arabian Nights' accumulation wherein an hour of the most casual exploration would discover just the materials he sought or, ten to one, something better. The dumps were at once a source of standard supplies and an inexhaustible bazaar of novelties.

Randon's gang — for of course he belonged to a gang; no boy of any spirit ever existed who was not a member of some gang, band or crowd — was not the only one which enjoyed the privileges of the dumps. There were several, exhibiting a wide diversity of character; the universally condemned "tough gang" was made up of young hoodlums, white and colored from a nebulous district bordering Maplehurst on the north; they were older than Randy's boys, averaging fifteen or sixteen years, stone-throwers, window-breakers, users of foul language, familiar with saloon precincts, not too scrupulous about property rights. The smaller lads dispersed upon their baleful approach, either in fear or distaste, or shoo-ed home-

wards by apprehensive mothers. The other companies, apart from an occasional black sheep, were mostly peaceable, law-abiding boys, ordinarily adventurous and mischievous. There was also a comradship composed of industrious, commercially-inclined souls who frequented the dumps for the sole purpose of mining out the old iron and other saleable junk occurring in rich deposits here and there, and disposing of it to dealers in that species of merchandise. By fits and starts, Mr. Randon himself, family traditions to the contrary notwithstanding, engaged in this traffic, as in other get-rich-quick enterprises such as shovelling snow, cutting grass, peddling picture post-cards, ornamental labels for fruit-jars, and the like. Once he very nearly earned the price of a general admission to the circus; Mrs. McQuair, finding that he had fifty-three cents saved up, supplied the balance, without too much comment. McQuair standards and those with which she herself had been brought up would not have allowed a son of the house to earn anything by manual labor; still she did not forbid it. Randon's industry seemed to move her to the same amiable amusement with which she regarded — or had the air of regarding — the world in general.

“No, I don't mind,” she said, when the youngster, whose conscience troubled him a little on this score, belatedly invited her sanction. “You will have to work when you grow up. It can't possibly hurt you to work now.”

“I'm going to have an office when I grow up, though. I'm going to have a business. I'm not going to work this way, of course,” Randy told her, reassuringly.

“Yes? I think your father would rather you went into a profession. You might be a doctor, for instance, like your grandfather, you know.”

Randon considered dubiously. “I don’t like taking care of sick people — unless it’s dogs or horses. I wouldn’t mind dogs and horses — being a doctor for them, I mean.”

Mercy! Mrs. McQuair’s smile almost became a laugh, but she held it in check valiantly. “Perhaps business would be better after all. I suppose all the boys expect to go into business.”

All the boys did not by any means expect to go into business; they wanted to be bare-back riders, or captains of Hook-and-Ladder Company No. 10, or engineers on the Big Four, as Randy knew very well. But he answered in vague and non-committal phrases; uh-huh — yeah — maybe — he shouldn’t wonder — with the innocent and absolutely defeating inscrutability of childhood. Mrs. McQuair felt as if a door had been politely closed and locked in her face. And serve her right, too! she thought with a kind of wistful mockery. Who was she to invade the boys’ quaint reservation? It was no thoroughfare for prying old women; and she retreated humbly. “What kind of work have you found pays the best?”

Randon pondered that question too, with a careful brow. “Why — I couldn’t say right off. Everybody pays you differently for the same thing,” he explained at last.

“Oh, but I should think you would set one price beforehand, and make a bargain.”

“Why — now — some of us does — *do*,” said the boy, fidgetting; “but you can’t always, you know, because people are kind of different with boys from



what they are with each other. I know a boy that carried a bundle for a lady from the cars, and it was a good big bundle, and when they got to her house, he told her it was a dime, and she thought he was just doing it to be nice, you know — that's what she said, anyway — and she got awfully mad, and wouldn't give him the dime, and then *he* got mad, but after a while she gave him five cents. She was a Jew lady."

"Oh!"

"The boy was a Jew boy, too."

"Oh! I should like to have been there. It must have been very interesting!"

Randon met her smile with suspicion; but, as always, something about it disarmed him — some quality of detachment that invited one to smile at her, too, and with her. In the smiles of other grown-ups, indeed about their whole attitude, there never lacked a certain condescension, a patronizing tolerance which the youngster dimly perceived and dimly resented; but his Mrs. McQuair never assumed that they two were other than equals. As such, he conscientiously set himself to enlighten her. "No, you wouldn't! You wouldn't have liked it a bit. I don't believe you know anybody like that. I don't know what her name was, but the boy's Solly Bamberger; he's in the Fourth Grade. His father's got a tailor-place on Myrtle Avenue. You wouldn't know him ever at all — not *ever* at *all*!"

"No, I don't believe I would," Mrs. McQuair agreed. "Men know tailors. I only know dressmakers, of course — like Miss Stieffel, for instance."

"Ye-es," said Randy doubtfully. It seemed somehow as if she had not wholly understood him; but he

could not make his idea clearer, because it mysteriously eluded even Randy himself.

“ . . . The veterinary suggestion was rather staggering,” wrote Mrs. McQuair afterwards. “ But I did not directly oppose it. . . . I would be the last person in the world to put foolish and contemptible notions about social grades into his head — even if I could; but consciously I have never tried to. Randon plays with all kinds of boys, as you see; the main thing is not whose sons they are, but are they decent, are they manly? Now I believe Randon is; and boys — men too, for that matter — are pretty sure to find their own level, like water, it seems to me. He doesn’t make any distinctions among his own comrades; but it was overwhelmingly plain that he considered me a very different sort of person from the ‘Jew lady’; and it was impossible that I should know the Bambergers not simply because they happen to be Jew tailors, but because of something else. Nor did bringing in Miss Stieffel satisfy him — I only did it to see what he would say, of course. I should explain that she is the sewing-woman I have who comes by the day for a fortnight Spring and Fall, and puts my wardrobe in order. She talks a good deal — all sewing-women do — not always entertainingly or in the best taste; but she is a nice woman with plenty of character and common-sense, for all her gossip, and the mainstay of her family which I have gathered is a large one, and a rather shiftless, easy-going lot. Her table-manners leave something to be desired, and she makes an unlovely noise in clearing her throat, but Randy would not take things like that into account. He sees that she works for her living and that I don’t have to, but that is evidently not the difference

that puzzles him. The queer thing is that he doesn't conceive of himself, only of me, as in a different class from Miss Stieffel!"

Mrs. McQuair, though she differed from most parents and guardians by smilingly disclaiming any very intimate acquaintance with her young charge's private affairs, would nevertheless have been somewhat disconcerted to find that she knew even less than she thought she knew. Randon was in a much better position to make distinctions between herself and the Stieffels, for instance, even if he could not exactly define them, than the old lady dreamed; he knew more about the Stieffel household at first hand than Mrs. McQuair, hedged with conventions, would have found out in a year had she bent all her cleverness, her gentlewoman's tact and her genuine humanity to the effort. And as to that other assertion of hers, made in entire good faith a while back, that he had no little girl associates, she was as far wide of the mark as — as the rest of us, even the most studiously and affectionately observant, when we lay claim to a like wisdom. Who really knows what is going on in his small son's head, to say nothing of the youngster's heart? Although without fear and without reproach, you and I can remember occasions when we did not render a strict account of our every action, or of every moment of our time, when, in short, we did not think it necessary to tell all we knew, as Mrs. McQuair herself has sagely pointed out; in conscience we might allow children the same liberty. Randon was not of a secretive disposition; it was only that he would no more have taken his grandmother into his confidence upon certain matters than he would have taken another boy into his confidence.

Miss Julia Stieffel's periodic visits to the house coincided — on a loose calculation — with the opening and closing of the baseball season; so that long before they assumed any special significance for him, Randy had become familiar with the sight of her, lean and flat-chested in garments of ominously unstylish cut and material considering her profession, picking her way across the dumps, with a tight little bundle of work under one arm, her skirts bouncing unbecomingly in the wind, her hat invariably askew. Many a time he had to lower his bat or pull up short in a dash between bases, to avoid her. "Now don't you kids get fresh with that baseball directly my back's turned! I don't want no baseball sailing into me accidentally on purpose!" she would proclaim in a high, strident and hysterically peremptory voice, shooting nervous glances this way and that out of her tired, dull-brown eyes; and the boys, while not resisting the temptation to "holler" and make faces and teasing gestures, heeded the injunction. Not that they were innately chivalrous or obedient — alas, no! The plain truth was that sailing a ball into Miss Stieffel would have been, according to their notion, a very poor sort of entertainment, not worth the parental "calling-down" they would infallibly receive for it, later; and that she could attribute to herself so strong an attraction aroused a kind of impatient and contemptuous pity. All they wanted of her was to get out of their way, and she might walk the dumps the livelong day in perfect safety. Randy McQuair never inquired the name of so casual and negligible a person, even when he saw her following the alley up to and through the rear entrance of his own garden; he was well acquainted with numberless clerks and

delivery-men, and called the garbage-collector Tim to his face, but no normal boy could be in the slightest degree interested by a forlorn, homely, old-maid seamstress.

“She ain’t anybody. She lives at Stieffel’s — that’s their house, that red brick over there. I guess she’s their aunt, or something,” a companion once volunteered, and Randy forgot the information almost as soon as it was uttered.

There came a day, however, when like many another young gentleman before and since, worked upon by the same forces, Master McQuair experienced and exhibited a radical change of attitude. Who so awake now to Miss Stieffel’s presence? Who so polite, lifting his cap and grinning amongst his freckles, squiring her to the alley-gate, carrying her bundle? And yet all the while it is gravely to be doubted if he cared one jot more for the lady than he had before, or courted her colorless, flavorless company for any reason except as a means to an end — such is the native duplicity of man, and so early does it manifest itself. The phenomenon was wrought by one simple occurrence — simple with the simplicity of all things or events truly great. Driven indoors one April afternoon by a steady downpour of rain, Randon unexpectedly came face to face in the back entry with a little girl about his own age — say, between eleven and twelve at this date — clad in what anybody else would have considered an ordinary school costume, with an upstanding bow of pink ribbon apparently spiked to her skull on top of a heavy mane of chestnut hair, strap-slippers on her narrow, nimble feet, and a clump of textbooks slung in a strap over her shoulder. To be sure she did wear this workaday equipment

with a certain zest and finish; the turn of her head, the motions of her slim little body symmetrically undeveloped, were game and graceful; but that scarcely accounts for the prodigious effect made upon Randon. For him the plaid gingham trimmed with zig-zags of braid trailed clouds of glory, the pink bow was a crest of Romance, the strap-slippers fit for Cinderella. In a word, Master Randon McQuair, having got along thus far scot-free in respect to his heart, incontinently surrendered at first sight, fell desperately in love with the dressmaker's niece — for that is who the charmer presently turned out to be. As is not infrequently the case, he was pathetically unaware of what had happened to him; he merely found himself singularly incapable of speech or movement at a moment when — as he also realized — singularly anxious to be brilliantly conversational and active. He could only stand and glower in a not unpleasant inner tumult, until the little girl — who, for her part, was as calm as a clock! — returning his gaze straightforwardly, remarked: "Hello!"

Randy, with unconscionable effort, managed to get out a greeting to correspond: "Hello!"

"You didn't know I was here," said the little girl, unconcernedly shifting her load of books and moving on towards the kitchen. "I guess you were scared coming on me so sudden."

Scared! What words for a Romeo to hear from the lips of Juliet! The imputation galvanized him into a painful activity of mind and body, a febrile eagerness to disprove it. "Hoo, scared! Scared nothing! I wouldn't be scared by you — I wouldn't be scared by anybody. I was just surprised."

“ Oh, well!” said the little girl, with indifference. She continued her advance.

“ Where’re you going?” said Randon, edging in the same direction.

“ Out to the kitchen to wait for Aunt Ju,” said the little girl, and with a sudden flare of defiance: “ You needn’t to worry. I won’t hurt anything!”

Her voice was ungentle, her manner anything but that which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere; but the shrewish mood became her; her great dark eyes flamed, her color rose delicately. The boy was too infatuated — yes, infatuated is the word — to notice anything except that this beautiful little creature was, as he would have put it, mad about something — something which, of course, he himself must have done, for she was accusation embodied; he had no idea what it was, but he felt stupid and unworthy enough in her radiant presence to have committed almost any crime. “ I — I didn’t mean anything — I just — I just —” he stammered helplessly. “ My name’s Randon McQuair. I live here.”

“ Tell me something I don’t know,” retorted the little girl, still in a crisp style; but something must have operated to soften her, perhaps the spectacle of his confusion; for she allowed Randon to maneuver between her and the door, while she stood, running her fingers up and down her shoulder-strap, eyeing him with a kind of shy directness.

“ Mine’s Nettie — Nettie Stieffel,” she announced at length, hesitated, perceptibly, then went on in a rush: “ I’ve seen you before.”

“ You never? Where?”

“ Here.”

“*Here!*” cried out Randon.

She looked at him, tickled by his astonishment, mischievously bent on prolonging the mystification.

“Yeah!”

“You mean at school? Or around the dumps?”

Nettie shook her head tantalizingly. “Nope! *Here!*”

Randon was reduced to objecting: “Oh, *say* —!” a piece of futility which moved the little girl to great glee, in which he presently joined in a muddle of delight and embarrassment. Both had now given up the pretense of any business or errand; they were lingering in the back hall in an enjoyment of each other’s society which was heightened for the boy by a spice of secrecy. He had every instinct of honesty, but somehow — somehow this species of adventure fell into the class of things that one kept to oneself. He was acutely conscious that he did not want any third person, above all any grown-up person to interrupt or overhear them; he knew that he wanted to prolong the moment to the utmost, that he wanted it to occur again, and that he was never going to say a word about it. Nettie, on the other hand, was enjoying herself thoroughly, undeterred by any *arrière-pensées* whatsoever; the whole world might have looked on and listened for all she cared!

“‘Aw, sa-ay!’” she mimicked. “Wouldn’t you like to know? ‘Aw, sa-ay!’”

“I can make you tell,” said Randon boldly, moving nearer.

“Can, huh? You better look out! You can’t start no rough-house with me!” shrilled Nettie, gayly belligerent, unshrinking. Almost any other little girl on earth would have divined that what he threatened



was a caress, not — good gracious! — not a rough-house; and almost any other little girl would have countered instinctively with the feminine weapons, coquettish reluctance, simulated ignorance, simulated fright, simulated anger. Nettie, instead of a kiss, looked forward to a fight — and looked with manifest relish! The pose is herewith recommended as one to be added to the list of defenses, for nothing more defeating could be imagined. Randon stood stock-still, confounded; that a boy should fight, fight in earnest, with a girl was unthinkable; even a mock fight, in fun, was unthinkable; he might hurt her. Yet this one seemed to take it as a matter of course. For one instant he — or perhaps the gently-bred generations behind him — recoiled with a distaste not far from disgust; then he remembered with ready indulgence that girls were always funny; girls didn't understand.

“Go on and make me! Make me tell, why don't you?” jeered the goddess. And no one can say how this little scene might have ended had not the goddess' aunt walked in upon it at that precise moment, with her eternal bundle, her hat on one side, and the lint and shreds clinging to her dress.

“Oh, there you are, Nettie! Did you bring the umbrell'? I wisht you'd run and get my rubbers. They're in the laundry sink. Right straight ahead of you through the kitchen and on out back. You can't miss it,” she directed and sank wearily into a chair. “You got home, too, I see, Randy. It's raining pretty hard, ain't it?”

That evening Randon and his grandmother sat at dinner in the fine old dining-room with the charming blue India china laid out, and a cluster of narcissus all brave in fresh green and yellow in the silver

christening-cup that had been handed down from some ancestral McQuair, decorating the middle of the table between the candles. With everything as usual, well-ordered and unpretentious, there they sat, and Mrs. McQuair said: "I hope poor Miss Stieffel didn't get wet going home. I offered her an umbrella, but she said she had telephoned home for somebody to bring her one. I don't know whether they ever got here with it, or not."

"They got here all right," said Randy, finishing his charlotte russe. The late sentimental experience had not impaired his appetite. "It was a girl."

"Oh, that pretty little thing with the black eyes?"

"I don't know — I didn't notice," said Randy, lying like a veteran.

"She has come once or twice before with things for Miss Stieffel — and I shouldn't wonder, for that matter, if the young Stieffels were not quite familiar with our apple trees," said Mrs. McQuair, tolerantly enough. "There's a perfect raft of them, the aunt says — children, I mean, not apple-trees."

Randon had a sudden illumination. Apple trees! Why, of course! He recalled the day of his arrival, every moment of which was still vivid in his memory even after the lapse of what seemed like a century; he was such a little fellow then, he told himself patronizingly, only eight. But he remembered, or fancied he remembered, exactly the look in those snapping black eyes, as she ran off, making a face at him.

#### IV

**I**T was a few months before the last recorded events that Miss Mildred Aymar had been added to the Stieffel household. Her coming was invested with a certain romance for the children partly, no doubt, by their mother's cheaply imagined sentimentalities, but to a much greater degree by the imposing expense and distance of the journey. They bragged about it unconscionably at school, displaying the colored postcards of "Indian Store, Albuquerque, N. M.," "Falls of the Yosemite," "Mormon Tabernacle, Salt Lake City, Utah," and so on by way of supporting their statements. Honest Frank sent these works of art by the packet, delighted to find "souvenirs" at so reasonable a price, and so easy of selection, although, to be sure, he was not able to visit one tenth of the localities pictured, his round-trip-ticket being over the shortest and most direct route practicable. "Could not take in this point," he would write, "but seeing enough as it is to last me the rest of my time. This is a great country. Wish you were here. Affy. Pop." The one of them that made the most impression on Nettie bore on its face the title "Smothered in Flowers" and represented a brown bungalow structure astonishingly like the Weavers', with spike-leaved plants on either hand of the entrance, the masses of pink and cream-colored bloom asserted to be geraniums and Marechale Niel roses masking the façade to the very roof. It was this

insane exaggeration that arrested Nettie's attention, not the graces of the picture, though even her Aunt Julia pronounced it "real pretty."

"Hoo, there ain't any flowers that grow like that!" said Nettie with contemptuous skepticism. "I guess they just put 'em on the card that way for an advertisement." And to point out that the postcard was an actual photograph, tinted, availed nothing against her inexorably literal and practical intelligence. "They could paint 'em on while they were doing the rest of the coloring, couldn't they?" she questioned, victoriously. "That's what *I'd* do — only I wouldn't ever want to fool people about anything."

"Well, you better not get to thinking you know it all, Nettie," her aunt warned. "Places are different. You wait till Pop comes home, and ask him." The common-sense suggestion commended itself to the youngster, though Julia had no thought of adapting her remarks to her small niece's character and understanding. That would have required a tact or discernment with which Julia was not gifted any more than Nettie herself. They were sufficiently alike in other respects besides to regard the coming of the "little California cousin" — as Mrs. Maggie continually referred to her — with not the heartiest sentiment of welcome in the world. It was "all right"; at any rate, it could not be helped; they must take her in, but — The family numbered eight already, two in every bed; there were never enough spoons and tumblers to go around; everybody's clothes were anybody's clothes; at no time was the house clean and in order from top to bottom; at no time was any job wholly completed; at no time were they without a case of sickness or semi-sickness — mumps, nose-bleed,

cold, sprained joints, infected cuts, Heaven above knew what. Mrs. Stieffel was capable of talking beatifically all day long about the little California cousin, without making a single effort towards assuring her comfort or that of anybody else, and this futile emotionalism irritated the provident souls of her sister and daughter without their being exactly conscious of it. Both the little girl and the old maid were inured to the spectacle of material details neglected, ordinary duties and responsibilities let slide; Nettie had never known any other way of life, and if Julia ever felt disposed to cavil she sternly reminded herself of her own conspicuous failure in her own sphere. They did not find fault with Maggie, they only snapped wrathfully at circumstances. Sometimes they talked matters over in private, Julia with her spectacles, sitting at her machine at ten o'clock at night after everybody had gone to bed, Nettie in her nightgown hunched in an old shawl with her bare feet tucked under her, intermittently wrestling with to-morrow's problems in arithmetic, a labor which the getting of dinner and subsequent clearing away had interrupted.

"Mom and Pop'll have to take Bunty in with them, that's all there is to it," Nettie says, decisively. "Three of 'em in together that way will keep each other warm, so they won't need that pink comfort, and it can go on the boys' bed. Bunty's the hottest little thing that ever was; I guess babies always are. Gracious, I wish this house had just one more room, don't you?"

"My, there's enough to take care of already, Nettie. You don't want any more beds to make?"

"Well, I would just love to have some place to

myself!" says the child wistfully, and then with resolution returns to her problem, as Julia dashes up another seam. There is silence for a while in the little chilly room with the soiled ribbon-and-rosebud "bed-room paper" on its walls, the soiled counterpane on the white iron bed, the soiled matting on the floor which is liberally littered besides with Miss Stieffel's sewing-scrap and ravelings. Nettie's clothes are laid straight and neatly over a chair, her school-shoes posed side by side beneath it. The child loathed this unkempt background; that she did not attempt to correct it was purely a physical matter; her time and her small strength were not equal to the task. In some recess of her mind she dimly and dumbly resented the enforced endurance as both senseless and unfair; the children did not have to play and tumble on the bed all day long, her aunt might put the trash in a basket instead of throwing it helter-skelter on the floor. The family only noticed her protests to laugh at them; but in Nettie's downright conception, there was nothing funny about it.

"Do you guess you'll have to make her clothes, Aunt Julia?"

"Why, I don't know. Buying 'em ready-made they cost a whole lot more and don't wear anywhere near as well. Trouble is I ain't got such an awful lot of spare time. Well, we'll see—" Julia said, sighing. It never occurred to her as strange, still less as pathetic, that she should be discussing these hard questions of ways and means with a little girl only twelve; she merely thought that Nettie was a real, smart, helpful little thing. Years ago Julia had given up expecting anything definite or satisfactory out of such a conference with her sister-in-law.

In due course Frank got back, and the California cousin with her rich blue-black hair, her large, odd slate-gray eyes abundantly fringed with long black lashes, her lovely tea-rose complexion, was introduced to the family circle. She was about Nettie's age and size, and the two got on well enough. They were not in the least alike, being — apart from personal tastes and endowments — the products of environments as dissimilar as day and night, as far asunder as the poles. Millie was probably by nature no more indolent than most of us are inclined to be, but she scarcely knew what work was; she had literally never seen anybody work at any occupation or in any fashion which Rochester Avenue and Nettie Stieffel could understand. The society of b'hanas and b'hanees had apparently "gotten by" as Frank said, managed to live and enjoy life for nothing! It was marvelous. The "fruits of the earth," a kind of ornamental phrase which in the beginning Millie often quoted with many other ornamental phrases, were their staple of diet; they sheltered in tents, huts, shacks, anything; they wore whatever came handiest — in Millie's case a few weird toga-like garments which Julia, in fear of scandal, immediately pitched into and remodeled. By way of church-services, there were "circles" where spiritual and intellectual refreshment was dispensed by some self-appointed votary; what doctrine was preached, or what practices obtained, Millie was sufficiently vague about to relieve Frank of some dire uncertainties. He was much more afraid of her imparting unwholesome knowledge to his own and the neighbors' youngsters than Mrs. Maggie; the latter took that oblique interest in pruriency which distinguishes the refined and morally uplifted sex, and the

society intrigued her imagination by potential indecencies which, realized, she would probably have found revolting.

Who paid the bills for this transcendental experiment, how they evaded the tax-collector or the hundred assessments levied by civilization and improvements, law and order, was, as has been said, a mystery. For one thing, they had no schools and patronized none; yet Millie could read and write much better than the average child of her age, much better even than Nettie, that star of the Eighth Grade. It was very evident, however, that she had a turn that way; on the other hand, figures were a sealed book to her. Only with the utmost effort and largely by the complaisance of the powers, could she be guided, led, shoved, juggled through intermediate mathematics. But when Friday afternoons, or days of fête, or nights of entertainment came around, it was inevitably Millie Aymar who ascended the rostrum angelically pretty, girlish, timid, appealing, and unfalteringly delivered whatever selection had been decreed with a memory that never failed, in a voice of delightful cadences; sweetly shy and tremulous as she looked, many a veteran public performer might have envied her self-possession. It was a question if she understood one-half of what she was reciting; Catherine of Aragon before the judges, Portia to Shylock, "Lest we forget," "Mr. Dooley on Prohibition," the Gettysburg Speech — all was one to Millie; it was only a matter of setting her a good copy. Her writing was accomplished with equal facility; verse or prose, she could reel it off by the page, the ream, the folio. Her achievements in this line vastly impressed Nettie, who for her part would frankly own that "theme-work"



was the hardest she had to do. "I never can think of anything to say. And whenever I do, why, it seems as if it only lasted for a few lines, and Miss Orr always wants us to write fifty or a hundred," she would complain ingenuously.

"Oh, I just love it! I always run over, and have to cut some off," Millie said, opening her big eyes ecstatically — if there happened to be a boy in the neighborhood, as there generally was. There was this difference between the cousins: that, whereas Nettie was always ready to help anybody out with a knotty algebraic equation, and not only could but generously would take any more backward classmate in hand and demonstrate an intricate geometrical figure clearly and patiently until the other grasped it — whereas Nettie was constantly willing and constantly being called upon, Millie seldom extended any corresponding aid in the branches where she excelled, and never was known to volunteer it. Miss Aymar cobbled strictly on her own last!

"Why, I don't know what I'm going to say myself. I think it's a perfectly fierce subject to write on," she would declare helplessly. "I was just going to ask *you*. You always seem to think up *something*. But boys are ever so much more *original* than girls anyhow. It's honestly not fair for me to be stuck in the same class with you; I can't keep up — just have to tag along after you the best I can, I suppose." That the mental heavyweights thus addressed were invariably of the opposite sex may safely be inferred. Millie was not over-popular with her girl associates; perhaps she was too pretty — though that did not interfere to keep Nettie from making warm friends amongst them.

And now Mr. Randon McQuair came on the scene, maneuvering around the dumps so as to get within range of the Stieffel back fence over which almost every ball he batted went sailing with an inexplicable perversity, fertile in dozens of other inane devices to make himself familiar in the Stieffel household, meandering by the house at least twice daily with his schoolbooks under his arm, though it took him squares and squares out of the way of his own temple of learning. The latter was a private temple, by the way; the grandson of all the McQuairs could not go to a public school along with the butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker, though he might consort with them elsewhere; boys will be boys. In Randy's case, his seniors had forgotten or overlooked the equally irrefragable truth that girls will be girls!

To do Nettie justice, however, she did not encourage him — rather the reverse. She would have been less than human not to have guessed what all this mooning about, these ice-cream sodas, Valentine's Day favors and the rest of the absurd boyish tokens meant; but, alas for Randy, they all left her cold. She classed him with the other suitors, somewhere between a nuisance and a convenience. Contrary to Millie who thoroughly enjoyed each successive flirtation or for that matter several at a time, and let no lad escape her young talons until he had been bled, squeezed, stripped of whatever worldly goods he could part with — contrary to Millie, Nettie never knew what to do with the young gentlemen. Soft speeches embarrassed her, an attempted caress drove her into a towering rage; the spectacle of male servility shamed instead of flattering her; she did not want to be helped and waited on, and to accept presents and attentions

would have laid her fiercely independent little soul under an unbearable obligation. In spite of her Beatrice-versus-Benedict attitude, she never lacked admirers; and one might have supposed that the formidable attractions of the other little girl would have aroused her latent femininity. But nothing was farther from Nettie's mind than jealousy; Millie was welcome to any of her following, including Randy McQuair.

And here the Fates stepped in with one of those small ironic adjustments so well known to us all. Randon cared not a jot for Millie Aymar. Her eyes and poses annoyed him, or moved his impatient ridicule; he saw through her perfectly. Even at twelve years old, the gentleman's son could perceive a distinction not only between little girls of his own clan and the Millie Aymars, but between the Millies and the Nettie Stieffels. It was the very absence of feminine guile about the latter that attracted him; clean, proud and vigorous, to win her over would be worth any number of soft interludes with Millie, in Randon's estimation. Master Randon did not put all this before himself in the above set of fine phrases; he felt it inarticulately like any other boy — like, in fact, almost all the boys who danced attendance on Nettie. For let it be remarked as another piece of irony that it was always the gentler, better-brought-up and better-behaved lads that took a fancy to the tameless Miss Stieffel, whereas all the pirates and outlaws incontinently "fell for" Millie's charms — in their own language. This latter young lady was not particular about their character or morals; sheep or wolves, so long as they wore trousers and lavished their spending-money on her, they were equally acceptable. Net-

tie, for an oddity, was the dissatisfied one — dissatisfied to the point of exasperation! She saw herself condemned to the attentions of all the molly-coddles, and mamma's-boys in the district, spineless creatures whom she, a girl, could boss and bully by the hour and who bored her in proportion, to say nothing of making her ridiculous. What she would have liked, for the rarity and excitement of it, would have been to be bossed and bullied herself. If she could have been coaxed or hired or intimidated into confessing any longing in that direction, it would have been for a conqueror; but she had never yet encountered this cave-man hero, unless — whisper it not! — unless it might be Jim Marvin.

Jim Marvin belonged to the tough gang. It was he, indeed, who had led Nettie into that descent on Mrs. McQuair's apple-trees long ago. The children had always known each other, although the Marvin station in the Maplehurst hierarchy was a shade lower down than the Stieffels'. Jim's father was a brakeman on the Big Four; Mrs. Marvin's mother used to take in washings, and it was while doing up the railroad shirts and overalls that the match had been made. They lived thriftlessly and not without an occasional squabble in one of the semi-slums to the north where the tracks came in; and by this time the son of the house was a handsome, strapping young brute of fourteen or so with the pronounced taste for sport which accompanies a disinclination to any variety of work or study. In another year, or as soon as the restrictions upon child-labor imposed by a righteous State, ceased to apply to him, Jim would have a job; he swaggered not a little about his prospects, but in the meanwhile was not doing much either in class or out

of it, to fit himself for the resplendent career just over his horizon. Truth to tell, he evaded school as often as possible, shooting craps, loitering around the saloons and pool-rooms, picking up a dollar at odd times in ways which themselves were not infrequently too odd to bear scrutiny. Nettie knew, or thought she knew, all about him; and with her shrewd little brain condemned him, while yielding a secret admiration to the dashing renegade in her heart. It may have been characteristic of Jim, but perhaps is of all boys at that age, that while he went in deadly fear of being caught with any girl or of showing the least disposition towards girls' society, he was by no means averse to an acquaintance carried on in discreet privacy. That student of masculine psychology, Miss Aymar, was not long in discovering this fact. *She* was not afraid to cross the dumps or to pass by corners where the tough gang were in the habit of congregating, not she! More or less openly she knew every member of it, and the circumstances lent an element of adventure to an affair already sufficiently adventurous. Nettie was not afraid either, but from different reasons; she was not afraid of anything, arrogantly confident in her capacity to take care of herself.

"The boys will let you alone if you let them alone. Anyway you don't have to be flagging 'em all the time. That's just going after trouble. And what's the use anyhow?" she contemptuously thought — but never said. Nettie was loyal.

Millie's industrious though most judicious "flagging" ended by attracting Jim Marvin among others. Since their childish days together, he had suffered the intimacy with Nettie to lapse, and Nettie herself was without arts to renew it. Now, however, he would

be forever turning up, answering Millie's *oeillades* from a distance, sauntering along, ostentatiously whistling, half a square behind the girls. He presently became aware of a piquant contrast between their methods of meeting his advances; and to the credit of his taste, found Nettie's directness, her frequent acerbities quite as captivating as the other girl's calculated feminine appeal. He would encounter Millie, say, at Harmeyer's waiting for the soap or the sugar or the can of baking-powder to be wrapped up, and innocently making eyes at Mr. Kraus, the butcher who was bald and old enough to be her father, in the meanwhile. "Hello!" Jim would say, and Millie would respond "Hello!" with a certain sweep of her eyelashes which had proved irresistible in numberless instances.

"What you think you're doing here?"

"Oh, I'm busy."

"Yeah, you're busy — I don't think!"

"Why, Jim Marvin, how can you talk so to me?"

"'Talk so!' Listen at you! I ain't saying anything," Jim declared jeeringly — but with an agreeable stirring of the senses at the same time. The girl had such a way of looking at him, with her great dark eyes, as if his least word mattered more to her than anything in the world — as if she would remember it, think about it, treasure it up the rest of her life! All the while he too saw through her; but the game fascinated him.

"Say, want to get weighed? Come on, I'll show you how to beat the machine." This sprightly feat was accomplished by balancing the coin in the slot, while both of them got on the platform together, in tantalizingly close quarters; and before it was well

over, Millie skipped off with a flashing glance, but the most straightforward of words.

“Oh, Jim, was I standing on your foot? Oh, pardon *me!* I didn't mean to —”

“Gee, it didn't hurt!” Jim mumbled, in an inward flutter that surprised himself; it was delicious and at the same time rather discomfiting. If he didn't watch out, he'd be treating her to something directly!

Nettie Stieffel set in motion thrills of an entirely different character; it was a chase and capture rather than a meeting. Impossible to get her eye as she swung along, and almost impossible to catch up with her if, in misjudged caution, he allowed her too much of a start. Going on an errand or to and from school there was no chance; Nettie was too intent on business. Besides, there was that McQuair kid. Jim was a year or so older than the McQuair kid whom, however, he knew in the desultory way of boys. They had been in swimming together when their respective gangs would go down to the sand-bar on the opposite bank of the river, called euphoniously the Queen City Bathing Beach; and once in a while they encountered around the dumps. But Jim had taken no interest friendly or hostile, in the other boy, until he observed Randy squiring Nettie about, a spectacle which young Mr. Marvin viewed with strong disfavor, why he could not have told. He was not exactly jealous; Nettie gave him no cause to be by exceptional graciousness to Randon, at any rate; never was any Corydon treated more cavalierly. Yet the older boy, for all his braggart's self-confidence, divined uneasily that Randon had in some ways the advantage of him. At bottom, the feeling was not personal; rather was it the ancient class-distrust, class-enmity asserting itself,

and very likely Jim would have disliked any boy who had Randon's pocket-money, his rifle, his bicycle, who lived in a big house, went away in the summers, belonged emphatically to what Jim had heard his father's associates call unpleasantly the "silk-stocking crowd." The sentimental situation aroused all his dog-in-the-manger instincts; and the worst of it was that he could not always gauge Nettie; he made the mistake of negligently denouncing Randon to her for a sissy, a statement in which Millie Aymar would have obligingly concurred, and was well-nigh dumbfounded at the savagery with which she turned on him.

"He is *not*, Jim Marvin! There ain't anything sissy about him! I s'pose you think it's sissy for him to take off his hat when he sees a girl. Well, *I* don't! I think it's nice manners, that's what *I* think!"

"Aw, you're stuck on him —"

"Well, you're good and stuck on yourself!" retorted Nettie at a white heat. Randon had never said a word to her in defamation of any other boy; and this fact taken with the girl's unsparing sense of justice provoked comparisons not altogether favorable to Mr. Marvin. "He ain't a sissy any such a thing!" she reiterated, secure in her own judgment, as always. She had never seen Randon in circumstances to prove his mettle, but that made no difference; Nettie *knew* that he was no sissy.

As it happened, the test was presently applied. Mrs. McQuair, upstairs in her room one afternoon, was making ready for a visit from young Peabody on business connected with the Peabody Tool Works preferred stock which she had owned and never received a cent of dividend from these twenty years, when she heard an unholy clamor somewhere about the prem-



ises, squeals and squawkings, a violent discharge of water from the garden-hose, the cook's voice raised in scandalized protest. It mounted momentarily in volume. Mrs. McQuair went to her window.

What she saw caused her to ejaculate "Mercy!" and make a movement to raise the sash and put her head out; but she arrested herself in the same instant. Shouting orders or reprimands from a second-story window was not a proceeding countenanced by the Victorian gentility of which Mrs. McQuair was an exponent. Instead she went downstairs, through the house and the kitchen, quick yet composed, instinct with the inimitable polite authority of her caste. "Ellen! Katie! What is the matter? What are the boys fighting about?"

Conclamant explanations filled the air. That big boy had come in the garden and turned the hose on the rabbits in their pen — Mr. Randon's rabbits that he thought so much of — and Mr. Randon spoke to him, and he used such *words*, Mrs. McQuair — the boy, not Mr. Randon — honestly, they'd heard language but never the like of them words he used, and him a real young boy too, and he was one of them tough boys from that tough neighborhood, North Maplehurst, out that way — and then Mr. Randon hit him — and my God, Ellen, you wouldn't blame him! — Right before them two little girls — well, one of 'em was eggin' 'em on, looked like — Oh, I wouldn't say that either, Katie — They're an awful tough bunch, all of 'em — Stop 'em, is it? How're you going to stop 'em —?

How indeed? Perhaps Ellen and Katie, both of whom came of a race whose taste for warfare is justly celebrated, were at heart not over anxious to stop 'em. The boys were pummelling each other in sincere ani-

mosity, Randon rather getting the worst of it, but gamely holding on; no science was displayed and no rules observed; kicks and punches were delivered anyhow and landed anywhere. It was a combat to rouse the late Marquis of Queensberry from his coffin; it was worthy to rank with the great fight between Slogger Williams and Tom Brown, the other great fight between Cuff and Dobbin, the less known but equally ferocious encounter of Berry and Biggs — all the heroic episodes of history and fiction! The women beheld the wild scene, helpless; one of the little girls, a very pretty little girl, as Mrs. McQuair automatically noted, came running to that lady with cries of terror and hid her face against her skirts, her whole graceful body trembling hysterically. It was touching, it was charming, the childish appeal. The other little girl, with a white face and black eyes blazing, dashed over to the hose which was lying there with a dribblet of water still seeping away from the nozzle, and snatched it up and directed it upon the combatants! “Turn it on some more! Turn it on, can’t you?” she screeched at the stupefied onlookers, and stamped her foot in a frenzy of impatience at their inactivity. “*Turn it on*, I tell you! Oh, my lordy, ain’t anybody got any sense? Here, lemme then! Where’s the hydrant?” With unimaginable, with incredible despatch she propped the hose on a haphazard brickbat, and flew to the faucet. She would have had the field of battle deluged, with what results none can tell, had not Mr. James Peabody strode around the corner of the house at that precise second.

He afterwards accounted for this extremely opportune arrival by revealing the fact that, coming punctually to his appointment, he had stood in the vestibule

ringing repeatedly for two or three minutes without response, and had thereupon decided to apply at the back on the supposition that something had happened to take everybody out of doors or out of hearing somehow. The racket was abundantly audible, but he had not paid much attention to it, or connected it with Mrs. McQuair's household. Under these circumstances the promptness with which he grasped the situation, the supreme efficiency of his method of dealing with it justified the reputation of his later years when those qualities had become his best-known characteristics; he never gave more conclusive proof of possessing them. He marched up to the two boys without any by-your-leaves or with-your-leaves, plucked them apart with a single muscular effort — James was a stocky, well-built young fellow in those days — and sent them spinning, one to this side, one to that, each with a peculiar sensation of somebody's elbow, knee or fist unkindly introduced between his ribs, behind his ear, in the small of his back! It was miraculous; he seemed to them to be all elbows, knees, and tough, expert fists. The tumult and the shouting died. The boys stood gasping, dishevelled, bloody; Nettie with her hand on the faucet, gazed in stark admiration, second only to that of the two Hibernian ladies; Mrs. McQuair was seized with nervous laughter in the middle of an apologetic speech. "Mr. Peabody, I — really — I — you —"

"Now, look here, you boys," said Mr. Peabody, tightening his tie; "if you want to fight, you ought to go somewhere and fight decently. That gouging each other's eyes and rolling around in the dirt — that's no way to do —"

"He began it, he began it!" protested Jim, in some-

thing between a snarl and a whine; "I wasn't doing nothing —"

"That's a lie, you weren't doing anything! He called me — he called me —"

"Randon! *Randon* —!"

"Begobs, if it was me, I'd scrub the mouths of the two of 'em, that I would!" remarked Ellen dispassionately.

"Mister, mister! Say, mister!" Nettie screamed an ear-piercing statement: "He threw water on the rabbits and they ain't his rabbits! Didn't he throw water on the rabbits, Millie? You did so, Jim Marvin, you did so throw water on the rabbits —!"

Mr. Peabody's heavy masculine voice came down on the reviving brawl like a stone. "Which of you boys belongs here? Is that your boy, Mrs. McQuair? Well then, *you* clear out! Hey? Oh yes, you will, son!" And Jim accepting some further invitation not too gently issued, and clearing out, Mr. Peabody returned to the lady of the house, taking off his hat, smiling cheerfully and reassuringly. His face was rather pleasant when he smiled; in repose, it was already mapped faintly with harsh lines, although he was not over thirty years old. "Better go bathe that eye," he advised Randon. "Oh no, it's all right, Mrs. McQuair. It'll look pretty bum, and feel so too for a few days, but it's not really injured. Boys are eternally getting into scraps and getting mauled up, you know —"

"Yah, it don't hurt! *He* couldn't hurt me!" said Randon, fiercely. "I could lick him easy — I *was* licking him —"

"Aw, *you!* You weren't licking him! You couldn't to save you! What you telling that boob

story for?" said Nettie with scorn. "I'd have stopped 'em, if you hadn't of come, mister. I was going to turn the hose on 'em. I bet that would have made 'em quit!"

"I bet it would too! That's quite an idea!" Mr. Peabody agreed, eyeing her openly amused.

Millie, still clinging prettily to Mrs. McQuair's skirt, spoke for the first time, raising eyes of shy adoration to his face. "Oh my, mister, I think you're just *wonderful!* You're so *strong!* Oh, my, I'm so glad you came!"

The young man actually blushed before that caressing little voice, that soft caressing look — blushed and fixed his tie again! Afterwards he asked Mrs. McQuair if she had happened to notice how extraordinarily pretty those two children were, particularly that little thing with the dimple — the one that seemed so frightened?

## V

**A**CCORDING to tradition, that vicious set-to between Randon and the Marvin boy ought to have laid the foundations of an enduring friendship; we have it on the authority of countless novelists and historians that nothing is so sure to engender mutual regard as a good, brisk, sanguinary trial of physical strength. But in this case, nothing of the sort followed. Jim and Randon went their divergent ways thereafter liking each other no better, though without an augmented dislike. The episode did not loom nearly so large in their view as an outsider might have imagined; if it did not go out of their minds altogether, they remembered it only with a humorous indifference. One fight more or less figured inconsiderably in Jim's catalogue, and the other lad, though not naturally quarrelsome, had been obliged to stand up for himself and give and take blows in earnest before. For the rest, as has been hinted, their lives were so conditioned as to bring them into contact very seldom. Jim went to work a few months later; and at about the same date, Randon was sent off to the eastern preparatory school whence he was gradually translated to college; in all he was seven or eight years away from home.

He shot up weedily during this time. From one vacation to another, the family would exclaim at his changed looks whereas to him they all seemed changeless. When he came home, the old house on the hill

was always the same, his Mrs. McQuair was always the same, both of them seemly and well-ordered as on the day he first saw them; old then, they apparently did not grow an hour older all this while. Sometimes he would spend a part of the holidays with the other relatives in one of those handsome, stable houses of his eight-year-old recollections; these likewise remained just as handsome and stable as ever, and the Aunt Dorothys, the Cousin Johns were leading the same heavily upholstered lives, and greeted him, season after season, in very much the same style — except that nowadays they presented him to strangers more often as “poor Aleck’s boy” than as “poor Louise’s,” and there was less kissing than there used to be. A gawky young gentleman of seventeen with an indeterminate voice and sadly afflicted complexion is not a good subject for endearments. From time to time there would be a gap in one of the households; somebody else had joined those ranks whereof the members were always “poor.” Randon dutifully tried his best to feel sorry; but in truth the death, even of his own father, did not touch him very deeply. He was not heartless or self-centered; he was only young.

The cousins of his own age were growing up too, a phenomenon of no especial interest in the case of the other boys as compared, that is, with the truly remarkable circumstances that attended it amongst the girls. Between visits one of them would change from a neat, trim little sprite playing with dolls and jackstones to a weird creature all sprawling legs and arms and wide, flat waist. Later on, in connection with a new shapeliness the aspect of which threw the senses into an agreeable commotion, they developed

extraordinary airs of age and wisdom — extraordinary and convincing. At eighteen, Randon felt himself a lout in the presence of these superior, skirted beings who, nevertheless, were scarcely a day older than he; in conscience their knowledge of the world must have been even more limited than his, their outlook on life as circumscribed, other lads sagaciously pointed out to him, but Randon put no faith in these deductions. He took the girls at their face value, in helpless and admiring awe.

That phase passed, of course. Presently Mr. McQuair had evening-clothes — to mention only one item of a wardrobe selected with the painful care of youth — and was going out to parties and dancing it was reported very well indeed, and gallantly providing flowers, candy, theater-tickets and what-not; and presently also, no doubt, he was sheepishly smiling on and being smiled upon in return, and exchanging more or less mushy murmurings with a succession of those erstwhile formidable divinities. The young fellow was fairly good-looking — nice-looking the girls pronounced him; and their mammas and all the older women were unanimous that his manners were charming. Whether a Victorian coloring had been unconsciously imparted to his upbringing by Mrs. McQuair, or whether a certain shy chivalric gentleness and reverence for the other sex were native to him, one might choose; but there was at least no flourish about Rando's courtesies which were invariably in good taste and had the air of being spontaneous.

Leaving college, he went into Judge Stanley's office, having elected to follow the legal profession, greatly to Mrs. McQuair's satisfaction, though the old lady was by far too tactful to make much of a to-do about



it. Outside of the professions, law, physic, divinity and so on, the only career suitable for a gentleman was that of banking, according to her antique standards; though she was capable of laughing at herself for clinging to them in a country and an age of commercial kings, who are also not infrequently gentlemen, all rumors to the contrary notwithstanding. One of the collateral McQuairs was "in steel," and one, alas for standards, managed a large concern for the manufacture of washing-machines; but in Randy's direct ancestry there was no taint of trade. Now in her mind's eye she saw him Judge McQuair, Attorney-General McQuair, Chief Justice McQuair at something less than thirty years old, very likely. Perhaps Randon himself had some such visions; he would eat a camel for luncheon! In the meanwhile, there was no pinch of means. He had some property, and would inherit more; to be just, the young man averted his mind from this latter prospect. He was sincerely fond of Mrs. McQuair whom he considered the finest of gentlewomen, and the brightest.

"I'm never going to get married until I find someone like you," he told her once, reddening like a girl, ingenuously honest.

Mrs. McQuair looked at him pleased, touched, amused. "Why, Randon, I wonder if you know that that is the very nicest thing you could say to me!"

"I'm saying it because I mean it. You know I wouldn't say it just to be nice," he said reproachfully. "Trouble is, when I do find her, ten to one she won't have me!"

They both laughed; but Mrs. McQuair remarked to herself that if Randon looked and talked and acted like that when the only girl was found, it was unthink-

able that she should resist him. "Perhaps I'm only a silly old woman, though, thinking he's the most wonderful boy in creation," she warned herself with a sigh.

Judge Stanley's office was in the MacDonald Building on Fourth, opposite the new Travelers' And Traders' Bank, the same bank that used to be a good way farther down town at the corner of Orchard Street. That location had ceased some time before to be favored by banking institutions; they all moved "up" in the train of the theater and shopping districts, the hotels and clubs and automobile salesrooms, which themselves were forever moving "up" obedient to the autocratic demands of American restlessness, American enterprise. When all is said, it is a wholesome enough manifestation; the changes are invariably for the better. The new Travelers' And Traders', for example, was a splendid, solid, fireproof structure, with vast areas of priceless space given up to mere beauty and convenience, things which the preceding generation never considered. Mammon had a mighty dirty, disordered and comfortless temple in our forefathers' day, ill-heated, ill-lighted, ill-ventilated; but we have changed all that. We have even made far-reaching and revolutionary changes in Mammon's staff of attendants, so that, in place of the shirtsleeves, green eyeshades, preposterous whiskers, derby hats and watch-chains with which old Hector McQuair, let us say, must have been familiar back in 1870, his grandson now beheld flowing to and from the bank three times a day a rustling tide of skirts, crested with flippant feminine headgear. High heels clicked, audacious travesties or translations of masculine attire amused and allured indefinitely. It was a pleasing spectacle, even to those pessimists who de-

plored the feminization of business, refusing to be consoled when optimists called attention to the fact that the girls were not entrusted with the big, important positions, and in their small, obscure ones were uniformly as efficient as the average male clerk and likely to be more honest.

“They haven’t the temptations and the opportunities to go wrong that a man has. They stay home nights, and they don’t drink, or play the races, or rush some girl, or go crazy over get-rich-quick speculations. No reason why a smart, level-headed girl shouldn’t make good in a bank or any other job same as a man,” said Mr. James Peabody. He was on the Travelers’ And Traders’ board of directors; and it may be remarked that, notwithstanding this valorous taking up of the cudgels on behalf of business-women, Mr. Peabody like almost all the other optimists never bestowed any notice on the bank’s galaxy of girl workers other than such as he would have on one of his own machine-tools; it was the pessimists who were most interested.

Pessimists and some others who did not come under either head. The MacDonald Building housed the offices of the Ohio Valley and Western Railroad system on its first floor where the shirtsleeves had it all their own way undisputed by the shirtwaists; nobody ever saw a young woman in a railroad office. Above them the twelve or fifteen successive stories were mostly given over to brokers and attorneys; the city office of the Peabody Tool Works took up one of the largest suites. As it happened there were very few women stenographers or clerks in the building; and naturally it was quite impossible for the male population when it looked out of the front windows to avoid

looking at the front windows of the Travelers' And Traders'. None of them avoided looking, at any rate, not even that well-mannered youth, Mr. Randon McQuair. He as well as the rest was familiar by sight with the red-haired girl whose head showed like a torch in the farthest recesses of one room; with the rigid, middle-aged one in black who pounded all day long on some sort of adding-machine; with the fat little thing that daily brought tit-bits to the bank cat; with a score of others whom he could identify on the street, too, unless their hats defeated him. Numbers of them brought lunches, an apple and a couple of cookies, a bar of chocolate and a sandwich, and were to be seen nibbling at the noon-hour, perched on stools and window-sills; others went down to the Dairy Tea-Room in the basement of the Chamber of Commerce, or to the Womens' Exchange, or the Kentucky Kitchen; and in the course of some experimental journeys to these places of refreshment, Randon one day caught sight at a distance of a tall, slender, striking young woman whom he recognized with an inward start, and an odd kind of shamed interest. He had not seen her for four or five years, and realized that he was on the way to forgetting her, might even have passed her close on the street, oblivious — a proceeding which savored unpleasantly to him of snobbishness. However, he was diffident enough to console himself with the reflection that she herself might not improbably have forgotten him; but meeting his eye across the Dairy she nodded, sparkling, and Randon felt disproportionately relieved and pleased. The young man with him inquired with every mark of appreciation who she was?

“Girl I used to play round with,” said Randon, un-

successfully attempting an indifferent tone. "I haven't seen her in I don't know how long, though — not since my freshman year, I believe. She lived in that little Maplehurst settlement just back of our house, you know?"

"*Oh!*" said the other to whom this information, sketchy as it may appear, was amply illuminating. "*Oh!* Well, she's a queen, anyhow!" He continued to glance that way from time to time after a fashion which Randon found singularly unbecoming.

"Here, you better cut that out, that staring. She won't like it," he remonstrated.

"Ho, she won't, won't she? It's all in the way you do it. You take a good look and keep on looking till she catches you. Then you kind of jerk yourself up, awfully ashamed. You're a gentleman, you know — you've just realized what you were doing — you're mortified, but you simply couldn't help it, she's so *et cetera, et cetera!* And then, when she turns her head away, you begin all over again!" his companion expounded, illustrating.

"That won't get you anywhere with this girl — not if she's like what she used to be, that is," said Randon; and presently Nettie bore him out by ignoring the other's demonstrations in a manner that defeated by stark simplicity. It was discomfitingly obvious that she did not know what he was about and, worse still, did not care; he might stare his eyes out, it was nothing to Nettie. The waitress brought her order, a glass of milk, a little platter of frizzled chip-beef, and a triangle of apple-pie upon which she fell to at once, hearty and unconcerned and in a rather ungraceful hurry; they were allowed an hour for luncheon by the bank, but she wanted to get through and go over

to Sheen and Sawyer's to look at their advertised bargains in underwear.

It was worthy of note, perhaps, that even at this early date she had the specific air of the worker. She was too young and vigorous to look jaded after the office day, she had not yet acquired the clerical stoop and glasses, and she possessed some exquisite secret of cleanliness, daintiness, ineffable style that many another girl envied her; yet Randon never questioned her being employed in some capacity somewhere; she looked it all over, in every movement. He wondered that he had never encountered her before, on the street cars or elsewhere in the hours when they would be going to their respective employment. He wondered, too, since she remembered him, if she also remembered certain sentimental passages of their 'teens, and himself blushed and laughed over the recollection that they were sentimental only on his side. Nettie never responded in kind, although he was sure she did not dislike him. He recalled having cut his hand badly one day in some boyish fooling with scraps of glass on the dumps, and how she had rushed him to the Stieffel kitchen and washed and bound up the wound which bled abhorrently, and treated it with stinging applications of antiseptic in a characteristically thorough way; and how she had worried over him and mothered him to his alternate delight and confusion for days afterward, until the cut began to heal. She was a queer mixture, he thought with a reminiscent smile and a growing curiosity as to whether she was queer still. She was as pretty as ever, no two judgments about *that*; and by Something, he had shown first-class taste as a boy!

“What has become of that Stieffel family that used

to live over on the other side of the dumps — of the place where the dumps used to be, I mean, before they built the garages and the automobile repair-shop there?" he inquired craftily that evening, striving all the while to persuade himself that the question was prompted by the merest idle interest. "That funny, dilapidated Miss Stieffel, the one that sometimes made your clothes, is she around still?"

"Oh yes, haven't you seen her? You haven't been home much, though, until this last year. Oh yes, she comes to me regularly," Mrs. McQuair answered, her hands meanwhile moving deftly over the coffee-tray; they had got to be a little bony and veiny of late, but were still fine, delicate hands — a gentlewoman's hands. "I think they've had a rather hard time. Poor Miss Stieffel is a good deal of a talker, you know, and I suppose she considers me a safe person to confide in; she's always been embarrassingly frank about their affairs. The father had a position in one of the banks and they got along well enough until he had a stroke or something, two or three years ago, and he hasn't been able to work since. It does seem so unjust that a good, hardworking man should be so afflicted while dozens of scallawags are allowed to go around, perfectly sound and active, making trouble!"

"Can't he do anything at all?"

"No. I believe his mind is all right, but he can't get about. He has to stay at home in a wheel-chair. Miss Stieffel told me he could do little things like peeling vegetables and washing the dishes; he pushes the chair around by taking hold of the wheels, and helps himself all he can, she says. They have that old chair that was your grandfather's. I sold it to them —"

“*Sold* it? That tumbledown old chair—?” Randon ejaculated. The young fellow was true to his traditions; that Mrs. McQuair or any other woman of his family should descend to selling anything, let alone anything like second-hand furniture, really shocked him. And to these poor, unfortunate people—! The old lady understood on the instant and checked his protest with a gesture.

“Miss Stieffel asked me what I would sell it for, and I told her five dollars. I *had* to, Randon, to save her pride. You can’t make objects of charity out of people like the Stieffels; you can’t give them things and help them. You’d only wound them terribly. That’s what makes it so pitiful.”

“That’s so,” said Randon, soberly.

“She insisted on working out the five dollars,” said Mrs. McQuair. “I daresay that was really easier for her, than to find the ready money. They must have had monumental bills for doctors and medicines and everything.” She sighed. “The whole thing was very painful. Some of the Stieffel children came up and got the chair and wheeled it home along the street, taking turns riding. Miss Stieffel told me afterwards that Nettie—that’s the oldest girl, I think—scrubbed it all up, and painted it white and they got some ‘art’ denim and re-covered the old cushions. She said it looked ‘lovely’—Randon, I could have cried!”

Randon listened with his usual prideful admiration, thinking what a great lady she was with her sympathetic and intelligent humanity. But at the same moment the disquieting consciousness visited him that this sad and shabby episode of the wheelchair, and the poor, broken-down father peeling pota-



toes in it, somehow removed Nettie Stieffel from him; he said to himself with a vexation which he suspected of being absurd that he wished it had been somebody else's wheel-chair that they had bought!

"The two older girls have positions in the same bank where their father was. Mr. Peabody got them in there; and of course, considering Mr. Stieffel's long service in that one place — I think Miss Steiffel told me he had been there twenty-five years — the bank-people did something for him, got up a little purse, or something. Mr. Peabody was at the bottom of that, too, I feel pretty sure, though he hasn't let it be known. He's a very fine man, Randon; everybody says so. There's a Stieffel boy, too, that is old enough to work now. And as for poor Miss Julia, work is nothing new to her; she's always been the mainstay of the family. Altogether, they manage to get along," said Mrs. Hector, and sighed again. "But, mercy on us, Randon, what lives some people lead!"

It did not take Randon long to expand the above information by several items which for some reason, the young man did not deem it necessary to impart to Mrs. McQuair. After all, why should he? The lives some people lead aroused her pity, but did not interest her. She would not have cared greatly to know that the bank where the two girls were employed was the Travelers' And Traders', that they were both in the invoicing department, and that one of them was not a Stieffel at all. But for this latter, it is conceivable that Randon might not have followed up his discoveries, hampered as he was by shyness; the campaign demanded an aggressive and resourceful character. Nettie was the last person in the world to meet him half way, or even to vouchsafe the slightest encourag-

ing sign, and to take the renewal of their acquaintance for granted or to push himself with that cool, distant, spirited young piece of womanhood was beyond him. He would raise his hat, passing her, and Nettie would give him a brisk jerk of her high little head, and there, for a while, the adventure ended. Thus they might have gone on forever, had not Miss Aymar been stimulated by curiosity or some other more characteristic emotion to exercise her professional skill.

For it was professional, by this time. Millie's talents developed early and had been sedulously cultivated, though had she been the merest bungler, she might have scored her triumphs still by virtue of sheer physical endowment. Her beauty had what Nettie's perhaps lacked, a delicately seductive quality; the girl understood it perfectly, studied it, adapted her dress to it. Nettie, who was as honest as the daylight, wore a stiff, high-collared shirtwaist because it was clean and practical; it gave her the air of a charming boy. On Millie, the same shirtwaist became a garment of subtle suggestion; her throat looked too tender for the iron-folds of linen, her slimly rounded body seemed intolerably imprisoned. The picture somehow stirred a masculine imagination to speculate as to what she would be, released. Let other girls mistakenly wear too revealing embroideries, too transparent stockings, Millie went provocatively covered. It was genius.

A related faculty and a few experiments advised her that Randon could not be depended on to "notice" when he was being "noticed"; more direct methods must be put in practice. He was, for all the world, just like Nettie herself, Millie thought—

afraid or stand-offish. The other girl often moved her to a kind of lazy impatience; Millie was good-natured enough, and fond of her cousin in her way; she could not understand why Nettie “. . . never did seem to care about having a good time with the men!”

“First thing you know, you’ll get too old, and your looks will go, and then they won’t come after you any more. You’ll be an old maid if you don’t look out,” she warned in all sincerity.

“I should worry, shouldn’t I?” Nettie retorted. “I’ve got enough people to take care of and do for already, without any husband foreverlastingly hanging around.”

“You don’t have to marry the young kind, you know,” said Millie simply. “They don’t often have as much as the old ones, and they want a whole lot more fussing over. An old one will just give you anything on earth, just if you’ll be ordinarily nice to him. I don’t know that I’d take a widower — not one with children anyhow. And I’d kind of hate it if he was bald. Still —” She lapsed into a meditative silence, sitting on the side of their bed, weaving a ribbon through the eyelets of an intimate undergarment; it was rose-pink ribbon which would be glimpsed only briefly and tantalizingly through the lawn of her blouse. I repeat that Millie had genius. “Wasn’t that Randy McQuair you bowed to to-day?”

“Yeah,” said Nettie, through a couple of pins she had between her lips.

“I’ve seen him before, round the MacDonald Building. He must be in somebody’s office over there. I guess he’s come back here to live.”

“Shouldn’t wonder.”

Millie eyed her cousin as the latter intently laid and pinned the pleats of a piqué skirt that needed re-fitting, with a feeling approaching exasperation. “ ‘Shouldn’t wonder’ ! ” she echoed. “ Well, for gracious’ sake, why don’t you find out? ”

“ What for? It isn’t anything — his coming back here to live, I mean, is it? Some of his folks have always lived here from ’way back times. And anyway I couldn’t find out without asking him, and he hasn’t ever spoken,” said Nettie in her most matter-of-fact manner; nevertheless her color rose faintly as she kept her eyes on her own charming figure in the glass.

“ He never will speak, as long as you won’t even bat an eyelash at him. And I’ll bet he’s just crazy to,” said the experienced Millie. “ It won’t hurt you. I would.”

“ Well, do it, then! ”

Millie took her at her word — and who shall say that that chilly young Vestal, Nettie, was not glad, in her heart of hearts? The very next day, as they were hastening towards the Dairy Tea-Room, whom should they run into but Randon hastening in the opposite direction. He took off his hat; they went a few steps; Randon looked back; Millie looked back.

“ Oh! Oh! It’s Mr. McQuair, isn’t it? Are you back home now? For good? You don’t say! Well, we haven’t seen you in a thousand years! I do believe the last time was on that old boat that time we all went up to Coney Island, remember? ”

## VI

THE meeting came about so spontaneously, so naturally, they all seemed to be so little changed and fell back so readily upon the old days, with laughter and questions and piecing out of recollections that Randon afterwards wondered with some scorn of himself why he had so magnified its importance? He might as well have spoken to Nettie long before; no impertinence about it to a common-sense view, and common-sense was now, as always, her strongest characteristic. He did not envisage clearly how much he owed to Millie; nowadays, as ten years earlier, he was not attracted by Millie, in spite of her conspicuous attractions. The girl, with her gift of astuteness in such matters, sensed his indifference, and to do her justice, made no attempt to overcome it, and bore neither him nor Nettie any ill-will because of it. Whatever the imperfections of her make-up, Millie was not jealous; she was too secure in her own powers; and for the matter of that, there were plenty of fish in the sea as good as Randy McQuair!

“They were too funny for words, Net and him both. They ought to have had a fire built under ’em — anything to get ’em started! I just couldn’t stand it!” she declared with laughter. “You never would have guessed they’d ever met — and they used to have a regular *case* when we were all kids together!”

“We did *not!*” cried out Nettie, the pink flaring

into her cheeks. "Speak for yourself! You've got him and I mixed up with some of your own crushes."

"Who you talking about anyhow?" their Aunt Julia asked. "Here, Frank, want to wipe this? Watch out, now, it's awful wet and slippery!" she admonished him in that tone of perfunctory kindness which it is to be feared we too often employ towards people in poor Frank's condition. He received the plate obediently and gingerly, handling it with a man's awkward care. They were washing up after supper, and Julia had been making such a racket with torrents of water thundering into the sink, and stacked crockery clashing, that little else could be heard; she was herself more in need of cautioning than Frank, with her rough, hasty movements. The two girls had come in late as often happened, and were taking their meal at one end of the kitchen table which was also the dining-table. The Stieffel family ate in the kitchen altogether nowadays, since the parlor of necessity had had to be converted into a bedroom for the invalid; he could not get up- and downstairs by himself. Mrs. Frank often deplored the sad lack of refinement about this arrangement, and that they had not the foresight to buy the Weavers' all-on-one-floor bungalow which had been for sale at the same time as this house. The erstwhile dining-room was the only place for the girls to "see their company" she sighed, and everybody had to go through there to get to any other part; and there was always so much to do when Pa went to bed to get him fixed all comfortable, you know, it was kinda embarrassing. It wasn't one bit refined — but what could you do? She came in at the moment with the hot-water bottle to be emptied and filled again; it

had lain on the table in the dining-room all day, along with Frank's shaving-things, a pan of fudge some of the children had been making last night, "The Fatal Wedding" by Charlotte M. Clay, and the pieces of little Roy's railroad-toy. What could you do, to be sure, with such an assemblage of unrefined articles? Mrs. Stieffel, in point of fact, did nothing; not only the table but the Mission sideboard and the chairs bore a similar accumulation from one week's end to another, most of it under a handsome bloom of dust.

"Who you talking about?" said Julia between two turns of the faucet, and Millie told her they were talking about Randy McQuair. Julia turned from the sink with a troubled expression flickering momentarily across her ageing, homely face; but that may have been due to the steam clouding her spectacles; she took them off to wipe them, holding them to the light. "Well, I hope you remembered to call him Mr. McQuair," she said, with a brief glance at Nettie.

"Right now, of course — but just you wait!" said Millie roguishly, and she too glanced at Nettie who, for her part, went on consuming canned salmon, canned tomatoes and canned pineapple, with an inflexible countenance.

"I'd just as lief as not call him by his first name," she said coolly. "'T wouldn't be anything so awfully out of the way. Supposing he called me Nettie, I wouldn't scream and faint."

"You and him was little sweethearts anyway, wasn't you, Nettie?" asked that unfortunate Mrs. Frank, scenting romance delightedly — and then indeed Nettie did blaze up!

"Oh, my goodness, Ma, do quit! You make me tired always thinking things!" she snapped out, and

jumped up with a fierce movement, and went to the sink with her plate and cup and saucer. Millie laughed at this outburst of annoyance; to be teased about a young man nowise disturbed Millie's equilibrium. When her uncle slyly inquired whether this wasn't Elmer's night, or which one of 'em was she expecting, she merely looked conscious and giggled.

"I guess I better make myself scarce anyhow," said Frank, cheerfully. He was always cheerful; even at the first when he suffered cruelly, even later when the pain at last departed, but left him almost helpless, with a tormenting difficulty of articulation, even later still after speech had been slowly re-acquired when it became a certainty that he would not be able to work again, but must be taken care of the rest of his days — even through all this he had never been heard to complain. He cried a little when the last dark news was broken to him, but only because he was physically so weak, as he assured them in an utterance that was still more or less thick and stumbling. "Weak 's a dishrag, y' know. Reg'lar kid. No use cryin'. All ri' dreckly!" he managed to get out painfully, gallantly. Now as he sat in the wheeled chair by the sink, though he was no longer ill, he looked like an old, old man. They could not afford to have the barber come to cut his hair as often as it needed. Someone at the bank had made him a present of a safety-razor which he could use fairly well; but his chin was generally stubbly, and he went without a collar these days. Laundry-work was so expensive, and she simply could not do up men's collars, Mrs. Maggie explained with a sigh; she had so much to do, anyhow, *some-things* just *had* to be let go. The theory likewise accounted for the invalid's none too clean



shirts, his old damaged carpet-slippers, the holes in his stockings, the spots on his coat. Now he wiped his fingers on the dish-towel, and took hold of the rims of the wheels on either side at the top, making ready to propel himself away. "Soon's you get that fixed, Mother —?"

"You stay right where you are as long as you feel like it, Pop," said his oldest daughter authoritatively. "You don't have to go off and hide just because of Elmer Hands, I hope. Millie don't want you to either, do you, Millie?"

"Sure not!" said Millie warmly. Then she added: "Only thing is Elmer oughtn't to get the idea we're taking him in and treating him like one of the family. I don't think that's a good plan with any man. It looks too anxious — and the dear knows I'm not anxious about him or anybody!" she finished off with spirit.

She could have said nothing better calculated to arouse all of Nettie's touchy independence; indeed, the pride of the whole family was somehow pricked. Elmer Hands, forsooth! As if they were going to turn the house upside down to catch Elmer Hands! Nevertheless, turning the house upside down was precisely what everybody — excepting Millie herself — immediately proceeded to do! Frank energetically wheeled himself off to the parlor-bedroom; Mrs. Stiefel spun about the kitchen in an effort to locate and pack up the pepsin-tablets, the eye-shade, the flannel rags, the medicine and tumbler, the plate of matzos for a nocturnal luncheon, the dozen and one pitiful small comforts on which the invalid depended; Julia gathered together her sewing and climbed the stairs to the cold back bedroom; Nettie hustled through the

remaining dishes so as to have time to straighten up the dining-room and make it presentable — all so that the imminent visitor should feel himself in a sufficiently formal atmosphere. Beyond setting the preparations on foot with that artless little speech, Millie took no part in them. She went upstairs and embarked on an ensnaring toilette. Dressing herself was always a business of time and studious consideration with Miss Aymar, though, oddly enough, she was not nearly so fastidious personally as the brisk and punctual Nettie who never lacked a button or tolerated a smirch, whose thick hair always lay in faultless folds, who glowed daily from a rousing cold bath, who spent a hard-earned fifty cents every Saturday afternoon to have her nails manicured. When Elmer, very nattily combed and cravatted; arrived about eight o'clock, there was only Millie to receive him in her dark blue cotton crepe with her hair arranged in the nest of puffs and short curls and encircling braids just then in fashion. Except for an occasional scuffling and squealing invasion of the younger Stieffels, and for indeterminate subdued sounds from behind the closed double-doors leading into the parlor, they were in a most genteel privacy.

Elmer was a pretty steady caller at the Stieffel house — but not too steady; Millie would never allow any young man to become so steady as to shut out other young men. She jockeyed them all with admirable skill, and a curiously unerring intuition as to the aims and character of the average male. Her field of maneuvers might have been narrowed had Nettie possessed the same tastes and gifts; but, as it was, the other girl had a practical monopoly. Nettie had never yet seen the man for whom she would

turn over her hand — so she said — and as to the light yet elaborate labors of a flirtation or a half a dozen flirtations carried on at once in Millie's style, she could not be brought to regard them as entertaining. "It must be deadly tiresome to get to really caring for a man, let alone pretending to!" she said. Millie was not sorry; two couples in the dining-room would have made the game so uninteresting as to be hardly worth while at all. So now while she sat and cooed with Elmer, Nettie in stern retirement with her Aunt Julia as of old, addressed circulars at a little shaky table jammed close up against the machine so that both of them could get the benefit of the single gas-jet.

"Extra job, Net?" her aunt asked.

"Yep. It's for the Warren Soap advertising-man. One of the girls heard about him wanting it done, so she and I got it."

"Well, you want to take care and not use your eyes too hard."

They worked on in silence for a while. "How's Randy McQuair — that is, *Mr. McQuair* — how's he look nowadays?" said Julia, correcting herself with some emphasis; she looked sidewise at her niece, biting off a thread.

"Why, just the same — only more grown-up, of course," said Nettie — and went on rapidly scoring down name after name in her firm, clear, clerkly hand. Julia said to herself that she would give her eyebrows to know what the young man had said, how he had acted, above all, whether there had been anything hinted about his coming to see the girls. She was afraid to ask, afraid of irritating Nettie, of wounding her, of merely rousing too much interest.

And why should old Julia Stieffel have worried her spinster head over the possibilities of Randon — of *Mr. McQuair* — being attentive to her niece Nettie? She herself could scarcely have told; but she would have had something much more definite to worry about could she have known what was passing through Nettie's mind as that hitherto frigid-eyed young damset sat and addressed circulars. At first it annoyed Nettie herself to find that she was continually straying off to that day's meeting — annoyed and even a little alarmed her, obscurely. *James D. Kane, Tulsa, Oklahoma* — he really was not so terribly good-looking, he just looked different; you might call it distinguished, only that was a kind of fancy word. Any way he wasn't a bit like any other man she ever saw — *Arthur Keane, Versailles, Kentucky* — come to think of it, he always had been different. Maybe it was his manners, kind of quiet — *Mrs. Virgil P. Kent, Poplar Street, City* — he must look nice in a dress-suit; seems as if it would suit him, somehow. He dressed in awfully good style anyhow, nothing extreme; and still he didn't look finicky or Miss Nancy-ish either, he just looked like he was used to it and didn't ever give it a thought. She bet he knew when girls looked nice, too; she bet he liked to see a girl neat and her belt and skirt always holding together and no powder nor nasty smelly perfume on. He wouldn't like the sloppy kind, no difference how pretty they were — *Cris. Knabel, Little Rock, Ark.* — Millie might make fun all she wanted, it was *nice* of him to kind of wait and hold back, and not make a dead-set at you because of knowing you when you were kids. It was enough nicer to be that way than to go trailing after every girl that looked at him;

plenty of fellows were fresh that way. It was *nice* of him not to be. She might get up earlier to-morrow morning and press out her handkerchief-linen shirt-waist; it was all washed and starched, just needed pressing. She could do it up again for Sunday. Of course he wouldn't go to the Dairy Tea-Room for lunch every day; he likely went to the University Club where all the college boys went. He —

“Through?” queried her aunt — and Nettie all at once became guiltily and affrightedly aware that she had been sitting with suspended pen, staring off into nothingness for the last two minutes — five minutes — she did not know how long! Then and there she performed very nearly the first purely feminine act of her life, namely: manufactured a glib lie.

“No. Just resting.” She doubled over her work again with a face feeling as if it were being held above a red-hot stove. But Aunt Julia obviously had no suspicions; the gods with their conscienceless irony made easier the easy Avernian descent; Nettie might tell all the tarradiddles she chose, her lifelong practice of tactless and uncompromising honesty rendered her immune.

In the meanwhile, could she have known it, Randy McQuair, with his coat off, walking around a green baize-covered table in one of the down-town billiard-rooms in company with several other young gentlemen, was having much the same difficulty to keep his mind on the business — or pleasure — in hand. The curve of Nettie's eyelashes, the pretty ripple in her hair where it was brushed up at the back, colored like frost-nipped beech-leaves in the shadow, in the sun living bronze — the firm and gracious sweep of her shoulder — her lithe, sure-footed walk — these and

sundry other details of her appearance recurred to him so persistently as to end by impairing his game. Jeering execrations, advice to replace the cue with a hoe, satirical inquiries as to his next match for the championship, sardonic re-baptisms as Young Shaef-fer or De Oro, ringed him round. He gave up at last with half-vexed laughter. "Can't do it to-night!" and sought the line of chairs against the wall, lit a cigarette and dreadful to report, signaled to Jerry to bring him a stein. Randon was a temperate, really an abstemious youth, both in eating and drinking, but his present frame of mind seemed to call for some such composing, meditative potion as good beer.

The beer was always good at Schuler's; it was a popular place. There were games going on at all of the six or seven tables. The bar was in another room, on the corner with ornate entrances on both streets; it was very high-class, nothing rowdy ever allowed to go on there, any one of its patrons would assure you. At the same time a more incongruous setting for lover-like reflections of the kind Randy was now indulging in could scarcely have been selected; but the truth was he did not yet realize that he was a lover. The place was thick with indiscriminate odors; there was a confusion of noises, mens' laughter, light curses, the clicking impact of numberless balls, a tumbler somewhere shattering on the mosaic-tile floor, one obstreperous table at the far end of the room challenging Schuler's large-minded interpretation of rowdiness — amidst all this Randy sat and smoked and gazed pensively as if it had been a hill-side in Arcady! There had been a business-like brevity about her speech that at once amused and

charmed; to talk business with that mouth! Her short upper lip was delicate in texture and as delicately reflexed as the petal of a rose. It was sacrilege to bind a creature of her free and flaming spirit down to the drudgery of figures and calculations and dull peoples' dull accounts. He recalled that, as a small boy, he had found an ancient edition of "Midsummer Night's Dream" with a picture of Oberon and Titania in the quarrel scene, wherein the fairy queen seemed to him the perfect image and likeness of Nettie, imperious and beautiful; he cut it out and kept it surreptitiously. Titania had grown up and was Titania still, and her spell was reëstablished. Randon wondered at and roundly rated himself for negligence in losing sight of her these last five years. A saying of Mrs. McQuair's that it was almost always harder to revive an old friendship than to make a new one occurred to him forcibly. It seemed as if, were it not for the recollection of that old-time childish devotion, they would be much more at ease now, Nettie and he—or at least he would. At twelve years, he had not asked if he might go to see her; he had gone! Why should that simplicity of behavior appear so unattainable at twenty-three? All the while he was cloudily aware that the only difficulties arose from certain fears based on certain insistent distasteful recollections—the dumps, the down-at-heel house, poor Miss Stieffel with her sagging skirts, her hat perpetually askew, and for a final touch, that damnable wheel-chair!

Somebody came and sat down beside him; it was young Marklein over at the bank, whose father was vice-president of the Travelers' And Traders'. The two young men exchanged a perfunctory grunt of sal-

utation; they had known each other since their school-days at the select institution to which careful elders had consigned them.

“’Lo, Mac!”

“’Lo!”

“Not playing?”

“Quit. Off my game.”

“I’m waiting for this table.”

They relapsed into silence. Randon thoughtfully rocked the last of the beer in the bottom of his mug, and finished it.

“Have another?”

“No, thanks, Emil. I’m going.”

“I saw you with some of those girls from our place to-day,” the other remarked casually, as Randon rose, stretching and shrugging his clothes into position. “Nice-looking lot of girls we’ve got over there. That little Miss Stieffel you were with is a hummer. You seem to know her.”

“Yeah, I know her,” said Randon shortly. He considered Marklein both offensively patronizing and offensively inquisitive; what business was it of Marklein’s what the girls at the bank looked like, or who knew them, he thought most unreasonably. And he decided inwardly that he never had had any use for Emil Marklein anyhow.



## VII

**C**ONTRARY to the teachings of his previous experience — which, to be sure, had not been very wide — Randon now discovered that there are ever so many ways of pursuing an acquaintance with a young woman besides asking her if you may call, and going to her house of an evening; those formal devices may be dispensed with altogether under some circumstances. For instance, the fact that Nettie was “in a position” — a phrase which against his will he somehow preferred to the alternative description of her as a “working-girl” — facilitated matters. The principals of the bank, of course, journeyed majestically to their duties every morning in large, glittering automobiles and kept more or less the hours of leisure; one and all, they had repeatedly favored Mr. McQuair with a lift on his own townward way. But, after having by discreetly circuitous inquiries found out what was required of the lesser personnel as to regularity and punctuality, could anything have been more natural for a law-student in Judge Stanley’s office than to be taking the trolley-car at the same time as a clerk at the Travelers’ And Traders’? — or to be going out to luncheon? — or starting for home? Or to walk some part of Miss Stieffel’s road with her, say as far as the corner of Rochester Avenue, seeing that it was also his own road — if he fetched a compass around two squares, and back nearly to the starting-point, that is? In the

old days, he had been used to cutting across the dumps, but that territory was all built up and built over now.

Somehow Randon never got any farther than that Rochester Avenue corner, though the Stieffel front-door was almost in sight; truly, Nettie never intimated by so much as a gesture or an inflection of the voice, much less in actual words that his company was desired. "Let *him* do the asking!" was her proud motto. She did not resent his failure to do so, however, or invent the forlorn excuses and explanations with which most women seek to beguile their sharper judgment. No, Nettie steadfastly believed in and practiced the gospel of live and let live; people did this or that because it was "their way." Why shouldn't they? And why worry about "their way," or question it? Did not she, Nettie Stieffel, want to go ahead and do *her* own "way"? Well, then —! She would have frankly told you that she liked Randon — liked him much more now than when they were children. She liked his being taller than herself — there were so many young men who were not so tall; and she liked a certain appearance which she hazily defined to herself in a hackneyed catchword of the day as "clean-cut." Above all she liked his manners, even to so ridiculously petty a detail as the fashion in which he took off his hat; there was something about his gesture, she thought, wholly different from other men's, though indescribable. In very truth, it did partake of Randon's sincere deference to the other sex, and expressed an attitude of mind rather than mere obedience to a convention.

"Oh, good-morning, Miss Stieffel!" (And off it would come, as if she were doing him a favor to let

him stand uncovered in her presence!) “Are you going to take this next car, or walk a little way? It’s a lovely morning for a walk —”

“Why, I don’t care!”

And upon this non-committal reply, they would fall into step side by side, and very likely get as far as the Christian Science church, or maybe even to the Paradise Park entrance before discovering with a duet of burlesque terror, that they had only ten minutes left to get in town. Perhaps they enjoyed the ensuing run and scramble for the car as much as the culpable loitering. Nettie was as fleet, graceful and shapely as a deer — or so the young man fatuously thought; she was still enough of a tomboy to delight in the race, and it tickled him infinitely to shorten his stride so as not to outstrip her. “I should think you’d be corking at any kind of athletics. Ever try anything in particular?”

Nettie shook her head. No, she couldn’t swim, couldn’t play tennis, couldn’t — this other game, what’s the name of it? The one where you knock a little, teenty ball round on the ground? Oh, golf! Yes, that was it! They had a club for playing it out on Adams Road; she’d seen ’em — at a distance, of course. It didn’t appeal to her much — looked so kind of silly, you know, grown people running around with that little ball, and having to have one of those boys trail after ’em and help find it. She could roller-skate, of course. She hadn’t ever tried horseback riding, but all there was to it was sticking on the horse, and she guessed she could do *that*. But she hadn’t ever had any time to fool away on games; she went to work the minute she got out of school.

“Well, I’m not much good at anything myself,”

said Randon, rather hastily. It too often happened that information like the above innocently imparted by Nettie had the effect of momentarily setting her at a distance from him, reminding him of some intangible barrier, or opening some invisible strait which the young man wanted with his whole soul to avoid, to forget. Questioned, he would have savagely denied that it existed at all. "I'm not heavy enough. I used to be on the track-team at college — the class-team, not the 'Varsity —"

"What's the difference? What d'you mean, 'track-team,' anyhow?"

There it was again! His girl cousins, all their friends, the other girls he danced with, sent candy to, took to the football-match, they all spoke shibboleth. No need to explain anything to them. At such moments Randon thought irrelevantly that there was something ineradicably wrong with our entire social system. This is a democracy — nay, it is *the* democracy; we have no castes, no classes; everybody is as good as everybody else; everybody is the same as everybody else. Of course, of course!

"Why, the track events are the ones you go in for singly — on your own, you know — sprinting and pole-vaulting and all that," he said lamely. "That is, generally speaking —"

"Oh! Do you do all that right out before a crowd of people, same as the boat-races and all? My, there's a whole lot going on at college besides getting your education, isn't there?" Nettie remarked with interest. "It's the same way at girls' colleges, too. I know a girl that went to one, and she's all the time talking about the flag-rush, and the juniors' picnic for the seniors and fraternity dances and things like

that. It was a co-ed — boys and girls both, you know. By what she says they must have had a grand time. Sometimes I wish I could have had the chance to go — but — I don't know — ” she gave a kind of pensive and dubious sigh. “ They keep talking about how much good and what an advantage it is in business, and saying you can't get any kind of a job without you have a degree from some college — but look at *me!* I'm holding on every bit as well as this girl for all her degree. Seems as if it would be kind of foolish to put all that money into something you could just as well do without.”

Randon changed the subject. “ Tell you what: I'm sure there's enough level space around our old place somewhere to line off a court on — for singles anyhow. I could get a net and some balls and things and we could play a little. You'd learn right off, and it's a barrel of fun. For two people, especially. There're aren't many games that are good for only two players; but tennis is first-rate. We could play Sundays — you aren't awfully strict about keeping Sundays, are you? ”

Nettie laughed. “ Gracious, I keep Sunday all the rest of the week as far as being good and serious goes. I guess that lets me out. As long as Sunday's the only time I've got to rest up and enjoy myself, I'm going to take it,” she said without bitterness. “ If I go to the bad place, I wouldn't wonder if I'll find people there that's in for something worse!” Randon felt violently that he would give anything he had, he would give his right hand, he would give a year out of his life, to be able to take her out of this grind that she bore so gallantly.

As it happened, however, he did not do any of those

things; he did not even lay out the tennis-court. Means, time, opportunity were always lacking somehow — or so he made himself believe. He took Nettie to luncheon at the fashionable restaurants, he took her rowing on the river; he took her to see the Ben Greet performance of "As You Like It" in Paradise Park, and to the summer-opera up at Coney Island. Sometimes they came across people he knew, sometimes it would be members of Nettie's circle; but as the fine old adage about two being company and three none is pretty generally known and accepted, neither set of acquaintances bestowed an inconvenient attention on the pair, openly at any rate. Occasionally they joined forces with Millie and Elmer Hands whom that young lady had not dismissed as yet; Millie was against dismissing anybody until some better prospect turned up, and even in that event she believed in a sheet-anchor-to-wind'ard policy. One never knows what may happen. Elmer had a good job with the Midland Coal & Coke Company; he was drawing twenty-five dollars a week with fair chances of an advance. Mr. Randon McQuair's income was not in excess of that, for all his old name, old family, old house and all the rest of his supposed advantages; and the future promised him no more and no less than Elmer; success for either one would be dependent on his own exertions, his own abilities. The two young men liked each other well enough; in fact, the arrangement of their *partie carrée* (namely: which girl paired with which youth) was so clearly, if tacitly understood, that neither Elmer nor Randon would have been so well satisfied with the company of any other man, even his best friend's. This way there was no poaching, no jealous uncertainty, no division

of attention. And in union there is strength; for a quartette is not nearly so subject to interruptions from outsiders as a duo.

One of their expeditions was to the Utopia Track on a Saturday afternoon during the racing-season. The girls met them down at the West End station, Nettie in her last year's brown suit freshened with a new immaculate white collar on the jacket and white cuffs, and with a new brown velvet hat tipped at exactly the right slant over her hair that matched it, but with a ruddy iridescence. Mrs. Duncan, that good soul, made that hat and charged her only seven dollars and a half; she was fond of the girl. Millie bloomed like a camelia in dove-gray that set off her impeccably clear matte coloring to perfection. They were so lovely a couple that Elmer might be pardoned the burst of pride and admiration in which he assured the other young man that they had "the two best-looking girls on the train!"

"And some fresh guys around here seem to think so too," he added, glancing about a trifle truculently, not lowering his voice. "Looks like they wanted to make sure of knowing us again when they see us."

He pointed this comment with a hostile glare at two or three of the offenders who indeed were eyeing their group rather too attentively. Randon had an uncomfortable second; Hands ought to know better than to notice those loud sports; it would make the girls more unpleasantly conspicuous than any amount of staring, he thought with irritation; you saw all kinds of men at the races — and women, too, for that matter; the best pose in a public place is blank indifference. In spite of himself there were times when he perceived with a flash of unwelcome insight that the

others lacked not what they themselves would have called refinement, but that far more serviceable quality, sophistication.

He let his own gaze move carelessly over the starers, and found his off-hand judgment confirmed. They were not a party of young fellows out for mere fun, excitement and adventure; all three of them conformed recognizably to the type he labelled cheap sport — the fat man in the flashy suit and green tie with a miniature slipper of diamonds stuck in it, the other one with the close-set eyes, not quite so prosperously dressed, who was now studying a racing-card and pencilling notes on it, the big good-looking fellow without any overcoat — he'd probably hocked it for the money to go out to Utopia and play the horses, Randon thought contemptuously — every one of them had the curiously unmistakable air of those whose only industry is what the working-world regards as idleness. The cramped, noisy, dirty, ramshackle little trains that shuttled back and forth between Utopia and the city daily for six weeks every spring and fall, were crowded with their kind. Young McQuair, who nevertheless was not at all straightlaced or pharisaical, surveyed the present car-full with scornful wonder, figuring to himself their unstable existence — in luck, out of luck, now princes, now paupers, balancing forever on the slack wire of Chance; of all insane ways to make a living —! And just as he was in the middle of these handsome reflections, the overcoatless young man spoke to him!

“Say, haven't we met somewhere?” was his stupefying overture: “I seem to remember you anyhow.” And, as Randon stood speechless in sheer surprise —



“My name’s Marvin,” said the other frankly and engagingly.

With the words sundry vaporous odds and ends of memories that had already begun to float through Randon’s mind, condensed; the garden, the rabbits, the din of battle; he had the grace to smile. “Jim Marvin? Why, of course! I believe the last time we met you blacked my eye!”

“It was a good fight, I guess,” Jim responded not untactfully, grinning too. The two girls looked towards him and recognized him at the same time, each after her own fashion, Nettie with her straightforward gaze fearless but not bold, Millie with a quick half-appeal, half-challenge. The other racing gentlemen looked on with lively interest; but, to Jim’s credit let it be said, he neither volunteered to present them, or thrust himself into the company of re-discovered acquaintances, whether out of native courtesy or from some feeling connected with an embarrassing lowness of pocket. Randon was inclined to set it down to the latter cause, for Jim was undeniably seedy. His clothes needed pressing, his linen was not so fresh as it might have been, albeit he carried himself with indomitable jauntiness, helped out by a clean shave and that swarthy, hawk-featured, piratical distinction which had been his even as a boy. Down at heel and not too clean he still had twice the presence of either Randy McQuair or young Hands who was a slim, unimportant figure. The three young men talked, standing up in the aisle, jostling to and fro as the train swung around the curves; but when the crowd was discharged on the Utopia platform, Jim joined his friends — or his chance companions —

and was presently swallowed up, blurred from view amongst the other hats and shoulders. Randon caught a glimpse of him only once again that afternoon, in the jam around the betting-sheds; he hoped with the perverse good-will we sometimes accord to the undeserving that Marvin had won, or re-couped a little, at any rate.

“That was Jim Marvin, wasn’t it? I knew him right off. He looks just the same,” Nettie said. “I haven’t seen him since the year One. What’s he been doing all this time, did he say?”

“Don’t look like he’d ever done much of anything, to *me*,” Elmer observed cannily.

Randon answered Nettie. “Yes, he said he’d been with the Big Four — off and on, that is. He didn’t say what position. He hasn’t got anything just now, but he’s going with the Peabody Tool Works next month —”

“That’s what he says, anyhow,” said the skeptical Mr. Hands.

“— He knew you, too. He asked me if you weren’t Nettie Stieffel,” said Randon, and laughed again. “Remember that scrap we had, and Mr. Peabody coming along and stopping us?”

Millie recalled that incident too, perfectly; she had been so frightened! “I thought you were going to kill him. I didn’t care a thing in the world about *him*, but I suppose seeing you so fierce and so awfully strong, just fairly wiping up the ground with him — I suppose that’s what scared me,” she said to Randon — and Randy, though his own recollections did not exactly confirm hers, still did not correct her! The idea of having terrified a charmingly soft, delicate creature like Millie by a hideous display of brute

force applied to another brute, should have revolted him, but alas for the souls of men, it didn't!

The afternoon wound up radiantly, with Randon ahead fourteen dollars, and Elmer exactly even; they all had their fill of excitement, and to crown everything Mr. Marklein (junior) whom the other two young men, on returning from one of their trips downstairs, found sitting next to Nettie and chatting very pleasantly and easily — he had happened by the merest accident to run across the young ladies as he was taking a stroll around, he explained — took them all home in his big machine, a delightful escape from the tedium, dust and fatigue of the ordinary journey.

## VIII

**I**N no great while Mr. James Marvin disappointed Mr. Hands' suspicions by appearing amongst the Peabody forces at the MacDonald Building, agreeably to his announcement. He had one of the minor office-jobs, it seemed, and whether it paid him enough to afford the conspicuous changes for the better in his wardrobe, or whether, as Elmer sourly hinted, his sporting activities had for once been productive, who can say? Elmer disliked and distrusted him most unreasonably, without knowing anything definite about him. Here he was, anyhow, dark and dashing and rather too stylishly fitted out with striped shirts, silk stockings, suits of the latest fancy in cut and materials; his taste in dress had perhaps been modeled on that of his associates of the turf, the billiard-parlor and other "high-class" places of entertainment. Here was Jim, I say, a little too jaunty, a little loud, a little ostentatious with his money, his strong, black, expensive cigars, his over-readiness to treat, his propensity for making eyes at a pretty woman now innocuously occupying a clerkly stool and going in and out on the office-tides three times a day like the rest of them. Being a newcomer, it was natural that he should seek the society of the few people he knew — natural but highly unpalatable to those two less showy heroes, Messrs. Hands and McQuair. Elmer thought that he was making a "dead set" at Millie. Randon was sure he was making a "dead set" at Nettie; and, unhappiest trick of all,

their doubts of Marvin bred a doubt of each other. As in many another game that starts out with four the addition of the odd hand turned the system of play from one of partnership to cut-throat.

Very likely Millie gently fostered these jealousies; Nettie, even had she realized that they existed, would have been indifferent to them. Yet, as time went on, it was certainly Nettie to whom young Marvin was most attentive. She liked him, with some reserves; she liked Randon, with perhaps fewer reserves. In fact, Nettie never would acknowledge to herself how much she liked Randon; she was obscurely troubled by the same consciousness, not of social inequality — Heaven forbid! There is no such thing as inequality in our society, is there? — but of, let us say, social difference, that hung phantom-like in the back of Randon's own mind. Nothing of the kind intervened between her and Jim; to be sure there was a sort of distant parallel in the suspicion she had that Jim had been "fast" and might be so still. But, whatever "fast" connoted to Nettie, it was something easily understood, likely to be predicated of any man; whereas her unease about Randon never would take absolute shape.

"I think that's the best-looking fellow you go with — I mean the one that's in the law-office," a desk-mate among the girl clerks said to her wistfully. "He's not so handsome; it's just that he has such a refined air about him — like Sydney de Vere. You've seen him in this last picture, haven't you? 'Love's Dilemma'? It's at the Palace — two reels, you know, kind of long, but it's good, and *he's* perfectly splendid. Mr. McQuair is that same type. Where's he live?"

“Adams Road,” said Nettie, shortly. Then she repented of her shortness, and added: “It’s about two squares from our house, the other side of the automobile place.”

“Oh. You’ve gone together ever since you were little, haven’t you? One of the girls said so, anyhow.”

“We’ve always known each other — that is, pretty near always,” Nettie answered her, wondering meanwhile by what agency a person’s private history and concerns become common property in the community; she herself never heard any stories, and never circulated any.

“She said he went with that North Hill crowd; she said she saw his name in *Society Jottings*,” pursued the other girl suggestively. But Nettie would not rise to the bait; it may be that in some infinite recess of her mind, for one baffling moment, *Society Jottings* embodied the shadow.

Fortunately for her peace, these misgivings visited her rarely and fleetingly; she was a healthy and exceedingly sane young woman, not beset by moods and nerves, furnished with a good, strong, active mind which was exercised almost wholly on her work. No one had ever taught the girl the value of concentration; she disciplined herself to it, intuitively. Nor did any vision such as illuminates and beckons a man along the road to success illuminate and beckon Nettie Stieffel; she had no dreams — only an essentially wideawake determination to be the best clerk in the invoicing department. And having a gift of thoroughness, speed and accuracy by nature, complemented by resolute drill, she presently became so much the best clerk in the invoicing department that in a

very short while thereafter, a substantial promotion took her out of it altogether. She went up to the vice-president's room in the capacity of private secretary, with an increase of two-thirds over her former salary.

Old Mr. Marklein — Nettie thought him old whereas he considered himself, at fifty-five, in his prime! — came of foreign parentage wherein, it was surmised, there was an Israelitish strain; he professed, however, the Unitarian faith, and for the rest was a stout, bald, well-dressed gentleman with civilly authoritative manners and a knowledge of banking which inspired his private secretary with devout, albeit perfectly impersonal, admiration. He had been with the Travelers' And Traders' all his life, and although during that time he must have had the adventures and experiences incident to most busy careers, he gave the impression of never having allowed any of them to interfere with business. There was an invalid wife somewhere in his background, at the big North Hill house, or Aiken or Pasadena or some German spa; he never mentioned her, probably did not need or miss her companionship much, or that of women generally, though treating them all — to judge by his manner towards Nettie — with the same perfunctory but scrupulous courtesy. Young Emil, who had a desk and some nominal position in his father's office, was much more appreciative.

Nettie scarcely knew of Marklein senior as much as has been here revealed; she did not care enough to find out! And as for Mr. Marklein himself, his secretary might have been a Jezebel for temper, she might have been as ugly as sin, she might have had one foot in the grave for all of him; the imperative question was: was she a good secretary? Far-fetched as the

statement sounds, they were fundamentally of an identical fiber, and got along together marvelously, while remaining personally neutral. "Aren't you afraid of him?" was asked of the girl. "I'd be. He looks as if he'd fire you if you put a comma in the wrong place."

"Well, why not?" demanded Nettie. "If I made a mistake I'd deserve to be fired, wouldn't I? No telling when I might make another, and no telling how bad it might be. Thing is to know your job and not make mistakes. I haven't got any patience with people that can't do what they're hired and paid to do — or lazy around and don't do it, anyhow. No, I'm not afraid of him. I haven't got anything to be afraid about!"

And likewise: "I've got a very good one in my office," said Mr. Marklein in response to some inquiry about women clerks. "She may know of somebody that you can get; but it will hardly be as competent a young woman as she is. Exceptional. Best one I ever had — best I ever saw or heard of, in fact! She can *spell!* I never have to tell her anything a second time." They both volunteered these testimonials in the same spirit of impersonal good-will with which they would have reported favorably of a particularly satisfactory piece of machinery.

The change of course separated Nettie in some degree from her cousin and the others; she had to keep slightly different hours. Millie and she now met practically only at the house, and to see Randon she must make an especial appointment. She was too interested in the new duties, too bent on learning all there was to learn about them to feel isolated, or to complain. Indeed, her whole discourse nowadays



was of the banking business — within limits, for she was naturally a cautious talker.

“You’ll get to thinking more about your old bank than of your — your friends, or anybody,” Randon said to her with reproach.

“Well, I *ought* to be interested; you can’t do anything unless you’re interested, I don’t believe. I’d *make* myself, or else I’d get out and do something else. Wish I’d been a man!”

They were standing on the Rochester Avenue corner, as usual. Randon’s eyes wandered over the girl with an amused tenderness that caused her to drop her own, in spite of herself; she wished he wouldn’t look at her that way, she thought, vehemently contradicting a certain deep-hidden pleasure.

“Oh, you want to be a man, do you? Why?”

“Well, I could run myself, for one thing. Women always have to be run by somebody.”

“Don’t you like the idea of being run? Being taken care of, and not having to work yourself? It — it would depend a good deal on the person — the man, is that it?” Randon ventured tentatively. “If you liked him —?”

“Oh, I don’t know that that cuts much figure in business. I don’t mind old Mr. Marklein’s running, much,” said Nettie in a hurry. “He just goes right ahead and attends to his own affairs and expects you to attend to yours. I don’t mind *him* running me.”

This somewhat bungling attempt to divert the conversation into safer channels was unexpectedly successful; for Randon said with ever so faint a scowl: “I guess old Marklein’s all right. How about Emil, though? See anything of him?”

“Oh yes, he comes in every day. I can’t see that

he does anything, though. He's never going to amount to much, I don't believe," Nettie avowed with that calamitous honesty which was Millie's despair. Not to seize upon so good a chance to make a man jealous was flying in the face of Providence, according to Millie. Randon's brow cleared on the instant.

"Oh, I don't know. Emil will probably get going after a while. He's bright enough," he said generously. *Noblesse oblige!* "We went to school together, but I've never known him very well."

"You haven't missed much. He's not your kind — oh, there's Millie coming!"

Millie was coming, sure enough, with young Marvin swaggering alongside her; and perhaps Nettie put more warmth than she intended into her greeting, with relief at escaping a situation that threatened to become acutely sentimental. It seemed to her that she herself was incessantly "putting her foot in," as she inwardly phrased it. Randon was on the edge of "saying something" — she recoiled with a kind of terror from the thought that it was something she wanted to hear — and instead of hindering him, she was malignly impelled to invite him on, make openings. Once or twice, accidentally touching him, she had felt him tremble; the girl's high, clean spirit shrank from the fleshly hint — shrank from the consciousness of her own answering thrill. For the first time in her life she could not understand herself. Before this she had always dealt competently with men; Jim Marvin's bold ardors — and he was very much more bold and ardent than the other young man had ever allowed himself to be — had never ruffled her. She could handle Jim, she thought with fine, virginal arrogance; she would not halt at a box on the ear,

should he presume too much. It was impossible, it was repellent, even to think of such measures in connection with Randon. He was *different*; in summing up, for the hundredth time, Nettie came to that same conclusion; he was *different*.

Jim went on up to the house with the girls; it was nothing to Jim that Nettie's home should be cluttered, disorderly, not too clean, that it smelled eternally of clothes being washed — and, alas, left unwashed! — of fried grease, of furnace-smoke, of Frank's medicine; nothing to him that Mrs. Stieffel went about in an ancient black serge skirt with green and rusty discolorations spotted down the front breadth, and a flannelette dressing-sacque insufficiently buttoned; nothing that they ate in the kitchen, or that Miss Julia Stieffel was wont to make use of her needle as a toothpick in the intervals of its legitimate employment. Too much of Mr. Marvin's life had been passed in just such an environment, to heed these superficialities; in the abstract, they were negligible, surely. How, for instance, could they affect Nettie? In Jim's eyes, not at all. What her other admirer would have felt, we can only guess; Randon had not set foot in the Stieffel house since he was a little boy.

If Nettie did not give any thought to that fact, Millie did, and her small shrewdness led her to an inference not very wide of the mark. "It looks funny Randy McQuair never coming round evenings to see Net, and kind of keeping off from all of us except her," she remarked meditatively to Miss Julia. "I guess he just don't want to know anything about how her home is; he knows it can't be like his. Well, I don't blame him," said Miss Aymer philosophically. "Only he can't hold in much longer; he'll have to ask her —

simply *have* to! He's perfectly wobbly-eyed whenever he looks at her —"

Julia, who had been absently half listening to the chatter as she worked, cut her off with startling sharpness. "*Millie!* That ain't a bit nice way to talk about any nice girl and nice fella — about his eyes, that way. I sh'd think you'd be ashamed," said old Julia in unfeigned disgust. "'T ain't so, anyhow. I don't b'lieve they're either one of 'em got any ideas like that in their heads. They're just good friends like they've always been —"

"All right! Have it your own way!" said Millie, with indolent laughter. What did the poor old thing know about it? She never could have had an offer in her life, Millie thought, but was too humane, or too diplomatic, to say.

"— And calling him 'Ranny' in that forward way, too. I don't know what's come over the girls nowadays. *We'd* have thought it wasn't real ladylike," Julia went on, unheeding. The color flamed in her withered cheeks; she sewed with violent gestures, strangely excited.

"Why, that's what *she* calls him. And he says 'Nettie' to her —"

"Huh! When'd they begin *that?*"

"I don't know — long ago."

"It don't mean anything," said Julia, most inconsistently. "He calls you 'Millie,' don't he?"

But Millie shook her head, smilingly mischievously to behold the other's discomfiture. "No indeed! '*Miss Aymar*' — just like that, as dignified as can be. And of course I always call him Mr. McQuair to his face. Oh my, no, Aunt Jule, he's not thinking of *me!*" she declared pointedly. "It's been Nettie right

along. You haven't been *on*, that's all! I tell you it's got to the point now where he'll have to speak to her or explode. He's getting simply wobbly —"

"*Shut up!*" Julia screamed at her, suddenly beginning to tremble. She tore off her spectacles wildly — and controlled herself in time to lay them down with her usual caution. To any spectator except the amused girl, there would have been something shabbily pathetic in the action; new spectacles would cost seven dollars, and Julie could not afford to endanger seven dollars by a gust of temper. Another observer might also have detected that there was something more than mere temper behind her outburst; the poor old spinster looked both frightened and anxious. "You'd oughtn't to have those thoughts, Millie," she said, striving for a judicial pose. "It'd make Net awfully mad if she knew. There ain't nothing to it — them going together, I mean — there ain't absolutely nothing to it. They're nothing but a coupla young people. When you get to my age —"

"I'll know a whole lot, won't I?" said Millie impudently good-humored. But she narrowed her beautiful dark eyes a little, studying the older woman with new interest. What under the shining heavens, Millie asked herself, was the matter with Aunt Jule that she went right up in the air this way, at the idea of Nettie and Randon — *Mr. McQuair*, Millie amended inwardly with a grin — getting married? He had money — *some* money, anyhow — and went with that society crowd, and he was crazy about Net; and as for the latter, in Millie's judgment, she would be a simp to let such a chance go. However, Aunt Julia always had acted as if the sun rose and set in Nettie; she probably thought nobody quite good enough for her

— with which reflection Miss Aymar shrugged away the problem.

Her own affairs were sufficiently absorbing about this time. Millie was actually making extra money — money “on the side”— working on a job Jim had got for her. When she communicated this tidings to Nettie, the other girl’s astonishment was hardly complimentary to either of them.

“You *are*? Of all things!” she ejaculated. “*Jim* fixed it up? *Jim*?” And after a moment during which she manifestly was viewing the matter from every angle, without surcease of wonder and amazement. “Well, I’d have imagined that if he knew about any outside job, he’d have taken it himself. I’ll bet he needs every cent he can get hold of!” said Nettie acutely. “What kind of work is it?”

“Just copying.”

“Copying? Well, it’s a wonder he don’t do it himself,” repeated Nettie.

“Why, he said he couldn’t — he didn’t have time, or something. And besides he said he felt as if he’d like to throw something my way,” Millie said. “Goodness, Net, you don’t mind, do you?” she asked with ingenuous anxiety. “It isn’t anything to be jealous about. He knew *you* weren’t in a position to do it — he said so; he thought of you first.”

Nettie flushed angrily, but let that hint about jealousy pass. Millie’s ways of being disagreeable were always indirect; she never would quarrel outspokenly with anybody. And the other, almost without knowing it, had long ago given up expecting to get anything better than half-truths — or half-lies — out of her. “Does Elmer know?” she inquired.

“Not yet. I haven’t told anybody but you,” said

Millie. As if on a second thought, she added the next moment: "I don't believe I'll tell anybody else, either. After all, it's nobody's business but mine, and if Elmer knew he'd get mad because of Jim having something to do with it. As it is, what he don't know won't hurt him. Don't you tell, will you?"

The argument was a perfect sample of that simple cunning she brought to all her dealings with the other sex, and Nettie promised silence readily, saying to herself: Wasn't that just like Millie?

## IX

**M**RS. HECTOR McQUAIR was now some fifteen years older than when Randon first saw her, at the head of the McQuair steps standing to welcome him to the home of his fathers, which is to say, she was all of seventy-something. Nevertheless she preserved her erect carriage and an alertness of the mind and senses which younger women found very encouraging to behold. She would sometimes say with her confidential air of refusing to take either the world or herself seriously, that she was reaping the reward of the woman whose looks in youth have been of a dishearteningly betwixt-and-between type; not homely, not pretty, it was as if time's assaults upon her had been dispersed or rendered ineffectual for lack of definite aim. Beauty is a shining mark for the gentleman of the scythe and hour-glass; but Mrs. McQuair's complexion had never been brilliant, so its fading was the less noticeable; her fair hair turned gray with so slight an alteration of effect that it might well have been gray from the beginning. In early middle life she had begun to dress the rôle of age, foregoing bright colors as carefully as she avoided kittenish manners; so that nowadays the inveterate black and considered suitability of her wardrobe did not seem to mark an era, as with most women. "My, Mis' McQuair, you could wear most anything with that neat little figger. Just lemme drape this a tiny speck buffant, it'd look so cute,"



Miss Stieffel would plead with her; but the old lady always shook her head, smilingly inflexible.

The day-dressmaker continued to come spring and fall as for twenty years past. They scarcely mentioned the dates to each other any more, the arrangement was of such long standing — two weeks in April, two weeks in October, regular as the solstice. And Mrs. McQuair was therefore the more surprised one day, when the appointment was still months off, to have word brought up that Miss Stieffel was downstairs and would like to see her. Miss Stieffel? Why, it wasn't time for her yet. What did she want?

Ellen, with the impassivity of a well-mannered servant, didn't know, madame. All she could say was that Miss Stieffel was waiting in the kitchen. It came unaccountably into Mrs. McQuair's mind that there had been some new tragedy in the family; that poor unfortunate "Brother Frank" might have had a second stroke, and perhaps Miss Stieffel had come to tell her that she would not be able to fill this engagement. The idea that the visit might be to ask for help Mrs. McQuair did not entertain for an instant; she had too fine an understanding of and respect for Julia's character. But that something serious had happened she felt sure, and surer yet when the seamstress was ushered into the room. It was not that Julia looked any different; her hat was always on one side, the strings of coarse pepper-and-salt hair whipping in her eyes and fringing frowzily over her collar at the back were no more untidy than usual. All the same, trouble stalked her unmistakably — the more certain and visible, perhaps, for the effort she was making to dominate it. She had stopped in on her way from sewing at Mis' Price's, she began to

explain in her high, saw-like voice, punctuating the sentences with a staccato giggle; Mrs. McQuair recognized in the performance a painful and grotesque parody of what Julia would have called the "society" manner. "Well, I expect you think it's kinda funny me turning up ahead of my date like this — *tee-hee* —!" She sat down at the old lady's gesture and immediately got up again; the movement was so indicative of taut nerves, that Mrs. McQuair felt her own tighten in sympathy. Now, however, Julia spoke in a sharp, unnatural voice to be sure, but all at once abandoning the giggle and the false airs. "I don't know if you know what's been going on, Mis' McQuair —?" she said, and paused in tense interrogation. The other's blank face answered her. "I didn't b'lieve you knew," said Julia; "I just *knew* he hadn't said nothing to you —" she broke off. "My Lord, that just *shows* — that just *shows* —" And, as Mrs. McQuair looked at her, still dumb, but with rising uneasiness, Julia said: "I mean Mr. Randon and our Nettie."

There was a half-second while Mrs. McQuair focussed her mind. "Nettie. You know who I mean, don't you? My niece Nettie. That real pretty girl you seen with me sometimes," said Julia insistently, taking pains to avoid the slightest possibility of misunderstanding. "*Nettie*. She's about his own age; they used to play together, kids." She raised her voice not without some impatience, as if the other had been deaf. "*Nettie, my niece!* I guess you don't know what's been going on."

Mrs. McQuair found that she too was standing up; she did not know why, or indeed how she had gotten on her feet; it seemed as if it must have required as

difficult an effort as that with which she now articulated: "What has Randon done, Miss Stieffel?" in a voice that sounded strange to her own ears. The soul of the old Victorian gentlewoman quaked with truly Victorian fears.

Nettie's aunt divined them at once, but with irritation rather than either offense or sympathy. "Oh, my goodness, don't go to thinking *that!*" she snapped. "The boy ain't done anything. Let alone he ain't that kind of a boy, Nettie's got too much sense, herself. *That* ain't what's the matter, and it wouldn't ever be, no difference how much they was stuck on each other. Seems as if you'd ought to know better'n to think it was *that*. The whole trouble is they've gone and got engaged, or as good as!"

Mrs. McQuair dazedly sat down again; the successive shocks of apprehension and relief had disturbed her physically more than she would have cared to admit. She heard the last announcement without being able to bring her mind to bear on it effectively.

"They've got engaged to be married, I tell you," Julia repeated, raising her voice again.

"Yes?" said Mrs. McQuair, helplessly.

"I seen it coming — only I kep' hoping it wouldn't come, somehow," said Julia. "Seems like I'd oughta done something to stop it. But there —!" she made a gesture of defeat. "You can't stop things like that, Mis' McQuair. You can't stop young people."

"No, I know that. I understand. You couldn't have done anything — nobody could have done anything," Mrs. McQuair assured her hastily. It was the truth; youth must be served; but her main feeling was one of thankfulness that she could at last say something non-committal, temporizing, inoffensive!

The good breeding which is essential humanity had fettered her.

“He didn’t say nothing to you, did he?”

“No. But you know, Miss Stieffel, a young man in love — he doesn’t want — he can’t be expected to —”

“Oh, he didn’t mean nothing underhanded, I s’pose,” Julia interrupted harshly; “he’s honest enough — or he intends to be. Only if it had ’a’ been some other girl, one of his own kind, some girl you knew or you knew the mother of, anyhow — one of these North Hill families — why, you’d ’a’ known about it fast enough, Mis’ McQuair.”

“Somebody else would have told me —” Mrs. McQuair began, and halted in the unhappy conviction that that was not the right thing to say. There was no right thing to say. She was an intelligent woman, not at all a small-minded woman, but she surveyed the figure of Nettie Stieffel’s aunt — the bride’s aunt, Mrs. Randon McQuair’s aunt! — and thought of the rest of the Stieffels with a ghastly sinking of the heart. Julia was speaking again.

“That just *shows*,” she said, with the emphasis of doubts confirmed. “Him not telling you, I mean. That just *shows*! Oh, I don’t say the boy re’lizes it. He’ll tell you directly. I guess he’s in love with her all right; and Nettie thinks a lot of him. I kinda got a notion she thinks more of him than she knows. They’re just a coupla young folks like any other — like they all are. They can’t help theirselves — falling in love and going crazy over one ’nother — they can’t help it. But —” she suddenly made a wild movement, actually wringing her hands together — her poor, coarse, mottled, knotty hands with the thick callouses of the thimble and scissors. “My God, they

hadn't oughta get married, Mis' McQuair! It ain't right! It wouldn't be right!"

There was anguish in the wail. The other old woman heard it with an emotion no less profound for being compacted of other emotions which Julia could not have understood, or understanding would have resented. No, the marriage would not be right; the clay pots cannot float down stream with the brass pots; each to its own current! So thought old Virginia, not with arrogance, rather with humility. Her position illogically shamed her. In what was she better than this good, upright, sensible, hard-working woman? But she *was* better! The superiority was not to be expressed in dollars, in endowment physical or mental, in anything tangible or worth while, but it was real, it existed. She recalled, irrelevantly, old tales of the aristocrats of the French Revolution going composed and sprightly to the guillotine, while the commoner sort wept and prayed and raved and struggled. Such gracious courage would have been hers, Virginia McQuair's; and such wretched abandon poor Julia Stieffel's. Even in this small crisis Julia was all unnerved, crying and screeching and trembling hysterically. It seemed to Mrs. McQuair that her own provision of good breeding — nothing but good breeding! — gave her an unfair advantage. Never to forget oneself and yet constantly to remember others was the very marrow of her class doctrine; that finely conceived discipline ought to be a staff, but had no business to become a weapon. Miss Stieffel herself was obliquely acknowledging its authority.

"Oh, he'd always treat her right, I know that," she got out between noisy sobs. "Mr. Randon's a perfeck gentleman. And *you'd* be just as nice to her as you

knew how; even if the way she did fairly set your teeth on edge, you'd act nice to her, and try not to let her see. But Net'd see through you; she just *couldn't* be happy. And she couldn't make herself *do* like you, or *think* like you or anything. She ain't that kind. She can do lots of things; Net's smart. But folks like you don't need to be smart to act your way. They get it learned into 'em from the day they're born, and their being smart or dumb don't make no difference; they all learn. I don't want to run down Net — my God, I sh'd hope not! — but — Mis' McQuair, it ain't right them two sh'd get married. Net'd be a fish out of water with your folks; and he can't go with hers. You *know* that; you *know* it!"

It was an accusation; Mrs. McQuair sat defenseless under it, conscious of the irony of her new desire to take up the young peoples' cause, merely to quiet and reassure this poor woman. The insurmountable thing was that this poor woman was absolutely correct in her estimates. To tell her that American girls are very adaptable, that Nettie would carry off the situation famously, that Randon in marrying her, did not marry the family, might be a kindness, might be an insult, old Virginia could not make up her mind which! She had been humanely endeavoring not to betray her own dismay, and again the other's honest unreserve shamed her; sudden rebellion against her whole system of amiable duplicities moved the old lady. Away with it! This was the hour for plain speaking. Yet, so ingrained was the habit of a lifetime — and surely no such evil habit, when all's said! — that she could not force herself to plain speaking. "Oh, it's — it's not so bad as all that, Miss Stieffel!" she protested vaguely.

To her relief, Julia scarcely heard this Laodicean speech in her own miserable preoccupation; she got her breath with another sob, and went on:

“I guess *I* ought to know, anyhow. I been going round years and years to people’s houses that you know; I been sewing for that North Hill crowd for years and years. I guess I *know*; I hear how they talk. When that young fella, that Jack Chanler, went off and married the girl that her father was one of the waiters out to the Country Club, and she clerked in one of them little notion-stores down the West End, didn’t I hear ’em talk? And who knows that girl, or goes with her now? What friend’s she got in that set? Not a one! They ain’t mean to her — or they don’t mean to be mean,” said Julia, forbearingly. “They just don’t pay any ’tention to her. Why, how can they? They got their own set of friends that they’ve gone with ever since they was all kids, and call each other by their first names and all. It wouldn’t be in nature for ’em to take *her* in. But how d’you s’pose *he* feels being separated from ’em that way? He must know it’s just because of her.” Julia halted for an instant to contemplate with a kind of melancholy triumph the point she had made, and Mrs. McQuair interjected another futility.

“Well — er — that was different —”

“Oh, you don’t need to think you got to stand up for ’em, just so’s to make it kinda easier for me,” said Julia, grimly. “Of course I know that’s your way. You don’t ever do any talking like some of the ladies; you always try to keep everything going along smooth, and always are on the lookout not to hurt anybody’s feelings. But you know you don’t want him to marry

her, Mis' McQuair. Why, you *can't* want it! I guess I know!"

The old lady, unable to choose between the brutality of agreeing with her, and the dishonesty of contradicting, was again reduced to silence. Her house of propriety was shaken to its foundations.

"There ain't anything to do about it. Anything you'd do to try to stop it would only make it worse, likely," Julia sighed. "Reason I come here and told you was just I wanted you to know how I felt, and then, too, I was afraid you might get the idea he was roped in, Mis' McQuair; and he wasn't. Net never crooked her finger to get him. She ain't that kind. My goodness, she's so pretty she don't have to do nothing to get the men after her," said the aunt with forlorn pride. "They hang round her all the time, as it is. She didn't do a thing to catch him, Mis' McQuair. It was all on his side —"

"Oh, I'm sure of *that*, I *know* that!" said Mrs. McQuair, warmly. "It's just as you say; there doesn't seem to be anything to do about it — that is — unless — has Randon spoken to her father yet?"

Julia stopped mopping her eyes with her dingy handkerchief to stare. "Spoke to her father? Why, what would he want to speak to Frank for? They ain't nothing *he* can do — oh! Oh, you mean has he ast him if he can have her? Why, no, not that I know of. He wouldn't need to, you know. Net's been working for herself for three-four years."

Mrs. McQuair perceived that, according to the code Stieffel, this absolved Nettie's father from responsibility. It had occurred to her that a refusal from him might at least delay proceedings. But, under the circumstances, any fair-minded person must con-



cede that there would not be much point in a parental yes or no, she reflected, reproving herself for a sudden insane desire to laugh.

“Of course they know. Of course Frank and Maggie both know,” said Julia with elaborate honesty. “I guess everybody around Rochester Avenue knows or suspicious it, only they don’t anybody say anything. Net’s kinda diff’rent to what most girls are; she won’t *have* any talking. She don’t like it. It ain’t that she’s afraid or ashamed — mercy, no! She just plain don’t like talking about things like that. She ain’t even said a word to me — and I’m enough closer to her than her mother’s ever been. Maggie thinks it’s all lovely, anyway. *She* don’t know anything!” said Julia impatiently. “She was saying the other day it put her in mind of one of them moving-pitchers she seen where a prince or a king or somebody comes along dressed up like a tramp, you know, and falls in love with a girl, and they get married and everybody thinks it’s awful till it comes out who he is, and it ends with the two of ’em setting on a throne and everybody bowing down to ’em — *silly!*” said Julia in an explosion of sane contempt. “She was going on about how sweet it was, and I says to her, I says: ‘Well, it would be grand if that was all there was to it. In a play you can have everything end up the way you want it; but in real life things don’t ever *end* at all. They just keep going on and on. And that’s what you’ve got to look out for when you do anything like get married.’ But there! I might as well talk to the pump. That’s the kind Maggie is, you know, Mis’ McQuair. She can’t help it. Well —!”

There was a short silence. “Well — there it is, anyhow!” repeated Julia, gave her eyes one more dab,

wiped her nose, and put away the handkerchief snapping her bag with an air of finality. "I just *felt* you didn't know about it, and somebody had ought to tell you. Of course he will before long, but — but —"

"I understand," said Mrs. McQuair quickly; a life-long practice in getting at other peoples' points of view enabled her to see that in being first with the information, Julia felt she had somehow upheld the honor of the Stieffels. "Thank you. It — it will be all right — er — it's going to be all right —" she could get no further than these hazy assurances, but indeed there was no need. Julia's main concern had been to discharge her own duty, to expose the situation; and that done she was visibly feeling the peace that is one of the reactions to calamity.

She went; and Mrs. McQuair spent the remainder of the day wondering whether she had better write to the relatives and get advice or let matters drift, countenance the business or treat it with indifference, speak to Randon or wait for him to speak to her? There were moments when she found herself refusing to take it seriously; and other moments when the vision of Nettie Stieffel — Nettie McQuair! — presiding at her table overwhelmed her. So this was the outcome of Randon's subtly flattering asseverations about not marrying until he could secure some one like herself, the old lady thought with ironic amusement. She did not know Nettie at all, but it was unthinkable that Miss Julia's niece could be in the least like Mrs. Hector McQuair. But after all, why should it not be for the best? The girl might be a very nice girl; if she resembled her aunt, she had a good mind, a good heart, whatever her manners were — Mrs. McQuair groaned in spirit when she remembered Miss Stieffel's.

In vain she told herself that minds and hearts are the things that count; the sardonic truth is that we must reckon with manners, too.

Not the slightest of her anxieties was the prospective interview with Randon that evening; but lo, it went off not ill! She heard him come home; and, as usual, they met at the dinner-table — that ineffably well-bred dinner-table with its pretty and unostentatious formalities. What sort of a dinner-table would Mrs. Randon McQuair's be? Mrs. Hector wore her black velvet dress with the collar and cuffs of delicate needlework; older McQuairs looked on sedately from the family canvases, McQuairs with whom Randon's tall and straight and slender presence consorted well. The weird fancy visited his grandmother's mind that perhaps in a workingman's shirt-sleeves, instead of a dinner-jacket, tired, greasy and unshaven, he might not look like a McQuair at all! Yet being a gentleman is not a matter of dinner-jackets and ancestors.

“Miss Stieffel was here this afternoon,” she said, at dessert.

Randon started ever so slightly, and looked at her.

“Yes, she told me,” said Mrs. Hector.

He went white, and red again. Not for worlds would either one of them have betrayed any undue emotion; their somewhat antique gentility abhorred a scene. But Mrs. McQuair, for her part, discovered that she actually felt no emotion save a desperate desire to get this passage over and done with!

“I was going to tell you myself this evening,” Randon said.

“Of course, of course. I don't think she meant to be — er — officious, or had any idea of — um — interfering — putting in her oar, that is. She only seemed

to want to talk about it—very naturally. She seems to be devoted to—to Nettie,” said Mrs. McQuair, forcing the name out resolutely. “I was a little surprised—I found that I hadn’t realized you were old enough to be married. I was thinking of you as a small boy still—” said the old lady—“*I’m being too fluent,*” she advised herself in a panic.

“I want to bring her to see you. She wants to see you—but you know she’s busy all day long in an office—”

“Perhaps some Sunday afternoon? But wouldn’t you like me to ask her to dinner, Randon?”

“Why, yes—I—that’s ever so nice of you. I’ll tell her. I—she’s very—I’m sure you’ll like her—”

It was done! Mrs. Hector, ruled by elder fashions, had been on the point of saying that she would call on the Stieffels, but though she had never seen the house or a single Stieffel except Nettie and the aunt, her experienced humanity warned her against the suggestion.

## X

POSSIBLY, if they had been asked, neither Randon nor Nettie could have told when or where or even how the question that had been in both their minds for longer than they knew had all at once been settled. The young man had imagined a dozen forms of words, had even tried to coach himself in some of them; he forgot every one when the time came. In fact, for all his scheming, the time somehow came unexpectedly; nothing happened according to schedule. They were taking a walk out towards the country, perhaps in the neighborhood of that little place called Wayne's, beyond the new subdivisions, amongst open fields, the trolley-cars left far behind, one or two factory chimneys on the horizon; and they came to a fence. He was helping her over it, needlessly, for Nettie was as active as himself, and told him so. "Never mind. I'm all right. You don't have to. I can get along better without you," she said, a little peremptorily in sudden nervousness, trying to withdraw her hand. Randon could only remember rejoining with difficulty and huskiness that *he* couldn't get along without *her* — than which no speech could have been more banal; but Heaven is witness that the average lover's eloquence seldom displays originality! He had to put out his strength to hold her hand; it afterwards seemed to him that in the violence of his own sensations, he must have been rough with her, but she said not. "Anyway, I — I

didn't mind — really mind — not even when I was trying to get away from you!" she confessed with that directness he thought so adorable. She was pink as a rose, and would not look at him, though.

They wandered about for a blissfully foolish hour — or more or less, he did not know — and finally brought up at the Fairmount Heights Interurban Terminal Station, without having the least idea of how they had got there. Nettie, however, decreed that since they were on the spot, they had better take the next car back to town; she was the practical one; the infatuated young man would have strayed along aimlessly forever. His thoughts lingered on that practical streak of hers with fond amusement, even while he was conscious somewhere within his being of a faintly jarring note; he had spoken of a ring — *the* ring — and it was her answer that jarred; the slightest possible cross-vibration — yet there it was! "Oh, don't go getting me any ring. It would cost a lot, and we ought to save. They don't mean anything; they're just for looks. You could do a good deal with that money." No doubt about it, Nettie was practical! It was funny, enchantingly funny, Randon stoutly maintained to himself.

On her side, Nettie, even had she been gifted with the dramatic imagination, would not have allowed herself to exercise it manufacturing prospective circumstances and speeches; a prudence, inborn as it was ruthless, stamped any such proceedings as silly. How could she tell what was going to happen? Perhaps he didn't mean anything after all. Men do and say all kinds of things without meaning anything. A girl simply had to wait for a man; that was the worst of being a girl, that having to sit around and wait

until somebody else made up their minds! And, if you were to ask *her*, Nettie Stieffel, she would just as lief tell you outright that she couldn't see what under the shining heavens any man wanted to get married for, anyhow. *She* wouldn't, if she were a man. At any rate, no use getting all ready for something that might never happen; you can't be sure of anything in this world. With which appallingly sensible reflections, she would resolutely shut Ranny McQuair out of her mind, and apply herself to work. And it is a fact that while Randon mooned away not a little of his time over Judge Stanley's papers, and did not hear when he was spoken to, and forgot inexcusably, and absently did the same thing twice over, and in brief displayed all the well-known symptoms of his malady, Nettie stayed along at her desk and typewriter as efficiently as ever, without the loss of a minute either of her employer's time or her own.

At home the news was variously received, though in no case with much excitement. Marrying and giving in marriage was a far more literal and simple matter in the Stieffel circle than in others both above and below it — if any such exist. Aunt Julia kept a boding silence. Mrs. Maggie wept a little and recited sentimental excerpts from her reading and from the film dramas, to Nettie's ill-controlled exasperation. Her father said: "Well now, that's real nice. I guess he's a nice young fellow. Only we'll miss you, Net. *I* will, anyhow, playing dominoes with me, evenings." Poor Frank had declined visibly of late, whether in the natural progress of the disease, or from advancing age, or the monotony of confinement; but it was as if his mind had receded rather than broken down; he was not childish, and not querulous even in moments

of suffering. It should be said to the credit of the family that every one of them from twenty-three-year-old Nettie the first-born, down to little Dave who was ten and the final arrival, though they had all inevitably ceased to regard their father as anything but a sad sort of chattel, nevertheless behaved towards him with unwavering patience and good-humor. It was not in Maggie to be unkind to anybody; and moreover the misfortune elevated her to the sympathetic admiration of her society, and excused a vast deal of what might otherwise have been condemned for slovenliness, laziness, slipshod management. She would like to keep things nicer, and do more for the higher life of the children — she felt so cut off from the higher life — but anybody could see how *tied* she was!

Torridly sentimental episodes punctuated by proposals of marriage being no novelty to Miss Mildred Aymar, that young lady evinced little curiosity about the details of her cousin's engagement, though she took a friendly satisfaction at hearing of it. "Looked as if he never would get there for a while, he's so shy, and you acted so stiff and stand-off-ish right along," she observed candidly. "Here recently, though, I was beginning to feel pretty sure something would happen. How did he do, Net? Work up to it gradually, or just blurt the whole thing out at once?"

"If I told you, you'd know, wouldn't you?" retorted Nettie, in as indifferently jocular a tone as she could compass, but coloring painfully. Within her unromantic soul there dwelt somewhere a fine, boy-like sense of decency and fairness that forbade her relishing this sort of discussion, commonly the most relished by her sex. If it was her affair, it was also — and somehow very much more — her lover's affair;



there was a point of honor involved; she felt that he would not degrade their bright experience with cheap talk, and should she? For that matter, the girl's clean mind had always rebelled at this hole-and-corner gabbling, in which she detected something sordid and sensual. No use, however, she argued, to fly out at Millie; that would only insure further teasing! And, in fact, Millie accepted her gay reticence without taking offense or persisting mischievously.

"Oh, all right, if you don't want to tell," she said with tolerance. "After all, there never is very much to tell, anyhow. I always think love-scenes in novels or on the stage aren't the least bit true to life. The people that write 'em can't know much about it. They always make the man do the greatest lot of talking, and the girl generally just stands first on one foot and then on the other waiting for him to get through, and looks down and whispers — too silly! Half the time when a man's trying to propose he can hardly say a thing — just stammers and swallows and fidgets. If a girl didn't kind of boost him along, he'd never get it said." She appraised herself thoughtfully in the bureau-glass, arranging a whorl of hair over each ear with deft and painstaking fingers. "Seems as if you might just as well have let him get a ring, Net. 'T isn't as if he was poor. It wouldn't have broken him."

"Oh, I didn't want to be bothered with people making remarks," said Nettie, again selecting the *argumentum ad* Millie.

"Well, that's so, too," the latter agreed not without a certain surprised approval; she scarcely expected so sound a judgment on this particular point from Nettie. "Everybody notices a diamond ring the first thing. A girl might as well be tagged with the man's name

and address. You can't have any fun with the other men, unless you take the ring off, and then *he's* forever fussing to know why you don't wear it. I keep the set of mine turned round on the inside all the time except when Elmer's around — and I don't believe that's so good for the stone, either. You're liable to take hold of something too rough and loosen it or catch it in something and pull it out, and besides it gets dirtier." Millie inspected her own badge of betrothal seriously. Elmer bought it of a traveling-man temporarily hard-up, for a hundred and twenty-five dollars; it had cost originally three hundred, the traveling-man said, and Millie verified this statement by taking it to a jeweller to be valued the day after Elmer presented it to her. "Oh, well, he'll give you lots of things, anyhow, so I guess you don't need to worry with a ring," she said, returning to her theme. "And then, not having one will make it easier for you to break it off with him, if you ever feel like it. One can't tell." Prudent doctrine, and, one would have supposed, after Nettie's own heart; but why was it, then, that she recoiled to hear it from the other girl?

She did not know of the elder Miss Stieffel's visit to Mrs. McQuair; nobody ever knew for Julia never told. The poor old maid felt guilty of a hideous disloyalty, yet wretchedly assured that she had done right. "The best you can do, it's a lottery getting married, like people say. I'm sure I hope you and him'll get along all right, Nettie," she finally forced herself to say, cowering inwardly before the stern accusation of two-facedness brought by her own conscience. What made it worse was that Nettie welcomed this tepid felicitation with a kiss and something very much like tears in her proud eyes — she

who so seldom betrayed any feeling, and from whom caresses were a rarity. The spinster sensed strong affection, perhaps a generous pity in that impulsive embrace; it was as if this young thing wanted to share her happiness with her aunt's deprived and lonesome age. "And me doing my best to stop the whole thing, all the time!" thought Julia in self-abasement; she may have shed some tears herself, the hard, unwonted tears of age, turning restlessly on her pillow.

In a few days Randon, with a slightly anxious smile — though to save his soul he could not have told what his anxiety was about — brought Nettie a neat, square, indescribably natty white envelope addressed to Miss Nettie Stieffel in Mrs. McQuair's handwriting, which itself exhibited a kind of neat dash. She was sure that Miss Stieffel would forgive the informality of this invitation; it was one of the privileges of old age to exact that youth should wait upon it, and she herself seldom went anywhere nowadays. Would Nettie come and take dinner Thursday evening at eight? And as it was also incidental — most unluckily — to her years not to know many young people, would Miss Aymar and Mr. Hands overlook ceremony and come too, so that their little party might be better balanced? She was very sincerely, Virginia Carey McQuair.

"Why, sure, I'll go — we'll all go. I know Millie'd like to," Nettie said. "My goodness, I wouldn't think of her coming to see me, at her age. She didn't need to worry about that. You tell her we'll come, will you? She doesn't want me to write?"

"Well-er — I don't suppose it makes any real difference —" stuttered Randy uneasily; oddly enough, he had in mind not what Mrs. Hector McQuair would

think or expect or consider due her, but what the other McQuairs, the Uncle Johns, the Cousin Dorothys — especially the Cousin Dorothys — would think and expect and consider due an old lady, virtually the head of their clan. All at once, they appeared to him as mortally punctilious people — foolishly punctilious.

“Well, you tell her, then. It doesn’t seem worth while writing letters back and forth when we live right on the same square almost.” So Randon carried the word home.

To Nettie’s surprise Millie met the invitation not only without enthusiasm, but with a very dubious pout indeed. “‘*Nice of her to ask us!*’” she repeated after Nettie almost snappishly. “Why, don’t you see she thought she *had* to ask us? That’s all stuff about not knowing any young people; she just don’t want to ask any of his friends, but she knew she had to have *somebody* beside just yourselves, or it might look queer. If we go we ought to wear low-neck, and Elmer ought to have on a dress-suit. He *could* rent one, I suppose, but I’d like to know where I’m going to get a low-neck,” said Millie, the most-serious trouble coming to the surface. “I’ve a good notion to write her and say we can’t come — Elmer and myself, I mean. I could say we had a previous engagement. Here, let me look at her letter again. It ought to be put kind of the same way she does —” Millie reached for Mrs. McQuair’s note, and applied herself to a study much more thorough and concentrated than she had ever bestowed on her lessons at school! Nettie witnessed the performance with amusement, perplexity and annoyance commingled.

“Well, of all things!” she exclaimed. “What *are* you fussing about? Why, I’m just going to wear my

white voile, and what's the matter with you wearing yours? What's your idea about being so diked out?"

"Oh, you don't know how people do!" said Millie petulantly.

"Anyhow, I guess you and Elmer'll have to go, Millie. I told her you would, and she'll know you're just making an excuse to get out of it. You wouldn't want to have her feelings hurt — an old person like her."

"Ho, much her feelings'd be hurt!" said Millie with scornful skepticism; and she reiterated her conviction: "I don't believe you ever *will* know how people do, Net!" Perhaps she was right.

However, being shrewdly aware of her own limitations in the same respect, namely: knowledge of how people did, Miss Aymar concluded to let matters stand; better to go and be done with it than to try to write a note and do or say the wrong thing in the wrong way. Millie felt herself equal to any situation, no matter how unaccustomed, and she had a curiously exact estimate of the value of her two assets, youth and real beauty. Inexperience and lack of sophistication — these are not Millie's own phrases, but a free translation — would show unmistakably in a note, for instance, whereas few were the positions wherein a girl could not make a success — "get away with it" were Millie's actual words — by merely keeping still and looking pretty. Again, perhaps she was right.

No such considerations beset Nettie. She was a little excited at the prospect of meeting Randon's grandmother, as was natural to any girl about to be paraded before her betrothed's family; but as to fright or self-consciousness —! Nettie knew no such emotions. She remembered Mrs. McQuair from child-

ish days, and had always thought her a "sweet old lady." Was she not consistently as nice as could be to Aunt Julia? Many times the latter had testified to it. Many times too the McQuair maids had treated Nettie to hot doughnuts in the kitchen; the fact that the same maids were about to wait on her in the drawing-room did not seem to her cause for embarrassment, though they called her by her first name, and her Aunt Julia often sat down to a cup of tea with them. She hurried home from the bank two afternoons in succession to press and furbish up the white voile; but when the evening came, gave no more and no less attention to her toilette than usual. She was always trim, clean, fresh, crisp. Julia hovered around her nervously, but without any suggestions. "Let the child go looking like her natural self. Mis' McQuair may as well know all there is to know about her, first as last!" the aunt thought fiercely. Mrs. McQuair, at that same moment, was rolling her gray hair up in the pretty puffs of her regulation evening coiffure, and wondering if her guests would eat with their knives? The picture brought a kind of dismayed smile; then she sighed. "Poor Ranny!" she said to herself.

But, after all, this redoubtable dinner went off very well — on the surface, at all events. The girls arrived promptly, escorted by Elmer looking fully as nice in his Palm Beach suit as Randon in summer white flannels. Mrs. McQuair and Nettie met without coolness but without gush, to the vast relief of the older lady; there was no lack of self-possession on any side. The dinner was good, and everybody's table-manners irreproachable; and the wine and the flowers and the ancestors excited no ingenuously comic remark, as

Mrs. McQuair had more than half expected. To be sure there were occasional threatened breaks when she kept the small-talk going by main strength — “But you have to do that sometimes no matter in what company you are,” she thought. “Dear me, I’ve been at table when people were entertaining some celebrity, and it was all-hands-to-the-pumps every few minutes!” This generation of Stieffels was an immeasurable improvement on the preceding one, she decided, and one could not cavil at Randon’s taste in looks. But with what she felt to be an unwarrantable perversity, the old lady found herself wishing that, if he must go out of his class, he had selected the other girl! Nettie with her brevity, her directness, her obvious indifference to small ornamental conventions, was not nearly so promising a Mrs. Randon McQuair in perspective as the little Aymar — what was her name? — Millie. *That* girl could be trained; something could be made out of her, thought Virginia. Without doubt, she was nothing but a sharp-eyed, terrifically sophisticated old worldling; but to do her justice, she honestly had Randon’s happiness at heart.

Queerly enough, something like the same thought had crossed Millie’s innocent young mind, too! Once or twice during the evening — and who knows how often afterwards? — savage impatience gripped her. What luck Nettie had, and how little she appreciated it! It was maddening to see such a chance thrown away on a person who didn’t care about it, didn’t even know it was a chance. Millie was not at all in love with Randon McQuair — she was not of the temperament to fall too much in love with anybody — but she liked him quite enough to marry him; she would have liked any young man in the same position

enough to marry him. The position was what captured her fancy. Not one single detail of that well-appointed meal escaped Millie, not one single feature of the life of the old house so far as it was unconsciously revealed to her in these two or three hours. Her cheap vocabulary furnished only the word "stylish" with which to define the unassuming courtliness of its atmosphere, but she was acute enough to perceive that the mere possession of money could not attain to this stylishness; some other attribute distinguished the McQuair home from the homes of Rochester Avenue. Millie did not — in fact, could not — recognize this attribute to be authentic gentility; she set it down as what a more subtle tongue than ours has poignantly labelled *savoir faire*. She watched Mrs. McQuair and took notes. "That old lady *knows it all*. There isn't a thing could happen that would feaze her. If Uncle Frank was to come rolling in here this minute in his chair, without any collar on, and egg spilled all down his chin, she'd know something to say that would pass it all off as smooth as you please, and make everybody feel comfortable. Well, she ought to know at her age, with all she's seen. I'll bet I will too, by the time I'm seventy." Never before in her life had Miss Aymar encountered an old person of either sex whom she would have deigned to imitate, but then and there she resolved to model her manners in future on Mrs. McQuair's, making allowance for the difference in their years, of course. And who will undertake to say the young woman was not well-advised, whatever shoddy ambition governed her? "Net is the *dumbest!*" she said to herself, almost with contempt. "Listen at her telling all that long story about the



phony note they discounted the other day, and what Mr. Marklein said and what the clearing-house people said and all the rest of it! As if Mrs. McQuair wanted to hear all that stuff! She don't know one piece of bank-paper from another, and don't care to know; she just sits and smiles and looks interested — and all the time she's ready to yawn her head off. Why *isn't* Net more *on*? She doesn't need to talk; she doesn't need to open her mouth. It would be a whole lot better if she'd just sit still and look at Randon, and act kind of shy and pretty — ”

“ You're not so much interested in business as your cousin, I'm afraid, Miss Aymar,” said Mrs. McQuair agreeably.

“ Well, I'm terribly dumb about figures and things, you know,” said Millie with a replica of her hostess' own smile, deprecating and humorous.

It was perfect, and old Virginia looked at her benevolently in strong approval. Why *couldn't* it have been this one?

## XI

**A** LAST century writer of some reputation once remarked: "Vanity of vanities! Which of us has his desire, or having it is satisfied?" And another at a slightly later date voiced somewhat the same conclusion regarding the nature of man when he pointed out that there are only two tragedies in life, one: not getting what we want; and the other: getting it. Mr. Randon McQuair, during this period was undoubtedly feeling the force of these philosophical deductions, though he would have vigorously denied that there was any truth in either of them. How could he be restless or dissatisfied, he who was the luckiest, the most enviable of men, he to whom had just been granted his dearest wish? The course of true love was running smooth as oil. Nettie was as lovely as ever; those gifts besides beauty which he so admired were as obvious as ever; she had nowise changed towards him unless in a new and delightful acquiescence which should have brimmed his cup of wholesome happiness. Nobody had raised any objections to the match, the family offered no criticisms, Mrs. McQuair was kindness itself, his friends were all complimentary — then what on earth was the matter? The fact is, if our friend Randon had been honest with himself — but what man or woman is ever that? — he would have confessed to a certain suspicion of this identical phenomenally smooth running. The young man knew his caste; all this pleas-

ant and placid acceptance meant nothing more than an impartial and good-natured willingness to watch one of its members through a piquantly unusual performance. He was his own master; what he did with himself touched none of them; it only entertained. It would have been unreasonable and unjust of him to have expected their attitude to be the same as if he had got engaged to some girl of their own circle — that is — ahem! — their acquaintance. The fact was no reflection on Nettie — Nettie who was worth a dozen of them as he told himself with fire; but it was a fact to be faced, nevertheless.

“ . . . *I hear Miss Stieffel is very pretty,*” the cousins — mostly those in skirts — wrote from their stately mansard-roof houses, modernized with new plumbing and electric lights, those houses which were uniformly in the old part of town where some of the old families still hung on; Randon had heard them thus described a hundred times. “ *The name is unfamiliar to me, but I have been away for twenty-five years, and no doubt would find society very much changed if I were to go back now. A great many new people have come in here, too — very charming ones, some of them. . . . I enclose a little note to the young lady, and will ask you to deliver it, as I haven’t the address,*” etc. Randon conveyed the missives in due form; and assured himself that Nettie’s wonder at receiving them, and her frank ignorance as to what to do with or about them were most deliciously naïve, ingenuous, adorable.

“ My, what a lot of relatives you have! Do they always make this much fuss over everything you do? They must think a lot of you,” she commented.

“ Well — You see these are almost all people of

my mother's age. They were all girls together, so of course they take an interest. I—I think it's rather sweet of them, now; though I remember it used to bore me to death when I was a small boy — ”

“ Uh-huh. This one writes a good hand, don't she? Just as clear! Was she ever in an office, do you know? It looks like she'd done office-work.”

“ Why — er — no, oh no! That's from Aunt Marion, isn't it? No, she's never done any work, except on charity-boards and church, and all that, you know — ”

“ I guess they made her secretary. I would have,” said Nettie, surveying Aunt Marion's even and legible lines in warm admiration. “ Yes, it's signed Marion McQuair Hastings. That other one is from Philadelphia, too. Do both those ladies live in the same house? ”

“ No. Mrs. Craig has her own home and lives by herself. She's a widow. Some day I'd love to show you those old places — little, plain old red brick houses, you know, with white doors and funny little old brass knobs and railings. They're all built up solid in rows, and it's not a fashionable part of the city any more, but the old ladies like to live there — ”

Nettie was not at all interested in the picturesqueness of old Philadelphia, white doors, brass railings, and so forth. “ Oh, *sugar!*” she ejaculated, twirling the letter between her fingers in open disappointment. “ Then I'll have to write to each of 'em. I thought if they lived together, one would do. You know it's kind of hard thinking up different things to say,” she explained to him very simply and earnestly. “ And generally it sounds somehow sort of flat, too. When they live in separate towns, I just write one letter

and copy it off. They'll never know the difference." Randon laughed; he did not ask her if she wrote on the typewriter and transcribed by the same efficient, tireless and eminently practical agency. He was afraid to ask!

In the meanwhile he himself was not cumbered with similar attentions from his betrothed's family and friends — naturally, since they were all of them resident in this part of the world, and by far the larger number in Maplehurst itself. Rochester Avenue had witnessed, more or less, every stage of the courtship from the beginning; it knew young McQuair by sight, and had known Nettie Stieffel familiarly since she was in the Primary; but, as Mr. Weaver put it, there was no call for anybody to butt in with congratulations on that account. However, he himself did go so far as to say, on meeting Randon at the Stieffel front walk and on being introduced to him — "Meet Mr. McQuair, Mr. Weaver," said Nettie, blushing red but game as always — Mr. Weaver, I say, grasped the other's hand very heartily and went so far as to say: "Well now, Mr. McQuair, I'm pleased to meet you, and I want to tell you right now, young man, you're getting a mighty nice girl! I guess I got a right to say it, I've known her all her life." Randon reddened too, and laughed awkwardly, but on the whole kept a manly countenance, returning the undertaking hand-shake with equal cordiality. Mr. Weaver reported him afterwards as acting not at all stuck-up like what you might have looked for from his folks, but perfectly plain and easy — easy as an old shoe. It was news which the neighborhood received with a lenient incredulity; pleasant — if true, was the general verdict.

There was one member of Maplehurst society, however, who made no secret of his chagrin; and that was the dark-browed Mr. James Marvin, who had considered himself to have entered the running with Randon, and was most disagreeably taken aback at suddenly being distanced. He had a pretty high opinion of his own attractions, and had set down her uniformly cool and off-hand behavior to Nettie's well-known "way." Now when he passed her on the street, he would give her a glance of reproachful and outraged regard — of which Nettie, alack, was entirely unconscious! Millie's report that Jim felt awfully sore at being thrown down surprised and annoyed, instead of gratifying her.

"Me throw Jim Marvin down!" she exclaimed. "Why, I never! He's been coming round to see *you*. He's keeping on coming just the same — except on Elmer's nights."

"Oh now, Net, don't make out as if you didn't *know*. You always act that way. Why, you did with Ranny right up to the last minute —"

"Well, I didn't — about Jim, I mean. Honestly. Of course he'd start sometimes to talk around that soft way, and I don't like that. Why, you *know* I don't. I always stop 'em when they begin that. You can't let 'em go on. First thing you know they'll be trying to kiss you."

"*Well?*" inquired Millie.

"Well, you can if you want to, Millie Aymar. Suit yourself! But *I* won't!" said Nettie answering something which the other girl had left unsaid. "If you're engaged to the man, of course it's different. I don't say —" she was adding hastily, but at this

second-thought qualification, Millie fell back, lost in laughter.

“Oh, Net, you’re *too* funny!” She laughed till the tears came, and she had to wipe them away, still laughing. “Anyhow,” she said, recovering, “Jim thinks you knew all along, and he’s pretty sore.”

“If he is, he’ll get over it all right — and it won’t take him very long, either,” said Nettie, shrewdly. “He’s not the kind to get heart-broken over any girl.”

So Mr. Marvin continued to deliver his melodramatic side-glances without effect. Millie wondered a little, privately, at her cousin’s taste; she herself considered that there was no comparison between the two young men in point of looks and “style,” the only advantage on Randon’s side was that secure and alluring height on the social ladder to which Nettie was so preposterously indifferent. The spectacle put the other girl out of temper; give *her* such a chance!

However, the camel not being forthcoming, a mouse would do. Millie had definitely made up her mind to Elmer Hands. Everybody said Elmer was a steady young fellow; he had no bad habits; he was a hard worker; he put money in the bank every payday. No item of this good rating made much impression on Millie except the last, but that alone was enough. Besides, Elmer had got his expected raise, and undoubtedly the firm would give him another on his getting married. According to Millie’s calculations, they could manage very well without her having to do too much of the housework, and she did not anticipate children; it would be a long while before they could afford to burden themselves with that expense and trouble — if ever! Nowadays she

passed more time even than heretofore in front of the display-windows filled with brocaded corsets, summer and winter furs, and the latest fancies in fine footwear, and read the columns of bargains in chiffon blouses with redoubled fervor. She was a thrifty little body with her money contrary to what might have been supposed, making it go farther even than the practical Nettie; it is true that, aside from her board, Millie spent only on herself, where the other helped out with the family finances. But then, look how much more Nettie made, her cousin would have argued; and look at the poor little fifteen dollars a week she herself drew!

It began to be evident about this time, though — at least to Nettie, who was the only one in the secret — that Miss Aymar's wardrobe was being expanded in accordance with a substantial increase of income. She made purchases for her bridal chest which were a good deal beyond Nettie's budget. There must be more in that extra work than she had lightly supposed, the latter thought; Millie must be getting pretty well paid. Nettie was generous enough to be glad on her cousin's account; her surprise was good-natured, her curiosity a species of applause. She was really fond of the other girl, and the manifest worth of those we like obscurely compliments ourselves. "Tell you, Millie, it's worth it to work a little harder and take down that much more pay, now, isn't it?" she remarked, surveying without jealousy the other's latest excursions in trousseau-buying, silk stockings and various be-frilled and be-laced intimacies spread out on the bed as they arrived from the shops.

"How much time do you put in, anyhow?"



“ Well, it’s according to what I have to copy, you know. Some days there’s a lot, and then for a while there won’t be anything at all,” said Millie carelessly. She was too absorbed in removing price-tickets and tying and re-tying pink ribbons to give much heed to either question or answer.

“ Oh, it’s not regular then? I thought it was a regular, everyday affair.”

“ No — just as the bills come through — sometimes a whole bunch and sometimes only one or two.”

“ Bills? What kind of bills?” said Nettie, her attention caught, a little puzzled.

If Millie’s sharp little wits had been only the merest trifle sharper, she would have discerned that the way to avert inquiry was to preserve her normal non-chalance; Nettie was used to and not infrequently irritated by her mechanical discharge of duties which she made no effort to be interested in, or even to understand, and Millie should have kept that pose; her cousin’s suspicions were not yet aroused. But the guilty fleeth when no man pursueth!

“ Just bills, I tell you. I don’t know what kind they are. I just copy ’em. Well, I wish you’d look! I do believe there’s a hole in that lace — ”

But she had said too much, or with too much emphasis; and now she was in too obvious a hurry to divert attention elsewhere. Nettie looked at her disturbed, somehow apprehensive. “ You’ve got to know what you’re copying. Even you couldn’t copy anything without knowing *something* about it. And what d’you mean ‘*come through*’? Come through the bank?” she asked in a troubled voice; “ what you been copying? ”

“ Nothing — nothing of any consequence, that is,”

said Millie airily. Then she added with an appropriate impatience: "My goodness, Net, if the bank people, if Mr. Franklin and all of 'em know about it, I don't see what *you're* worrying for!"

There was a brief pause. Nettie did not challenge this last speech, although she recognized it for one of Millie's own brand of half-way statements; charged with it later, she had left herself a loophole to squeeze out of the indictment; she had been misquoted, she had never said this, she had never said that, the other's inference was all wrong, and so on and so on. There was nothing so sure as that neither Mr. Franklin nor any other of the bank authorities knew anything of this mysterious copying; but Nettie said only: "I'm not worrying specially — I'm just asking. Do you give the copies to Jim? And then does he pay you for them?"

This time there was no way out but a direct answer. "Yes," said Millie sulkily. "Say, look! Isn't that a hole? The pattern don't match it on this other sleeve —"

Nettie got up off the bed. She was genuinely shocked, and her gesture swept aside the other's trivialities like so much chaff. "Millie," she said with both alarm and indignation; "don't you know you can't do things like that? You can't copy off the bank's papers and give 'em to somebody outside — not the least little tiny scrap you can't. You — why, you just *can't*, that's all. It's not what you ought to do — it's not right. Don't you *know* that?"

"Oh, stuff! Jim says it's all right, and he's a *man*. Men always know. Any way I guess he knows as much about this as you do, and he says it's all right —"

“Then why’s he so careful about your not telling anybody?” said Nettie, keenly. It was a shot in the dark, but it hit the target. Millie began to babble excitedly.

“Why, Nettie Stieffel, how you talk! Jim never said a word to me about not telling anybody — not one word. It was me — on account of Elmer being jealous. That’s the only reason I didn’t want it to get around; that’s the only reason I never told anybody —”

“Why, you just now said they all knew at the bank!”

Millie, cornered, evaded the other girl’s eyes desperately. “Well — not *everybody* — I didn’t say that, anyhow — I just said *supposing* they knew — I — I — oh, do *quit*, Net!” she burst out petulantly. “I’m never going to tell you anything again; you’re always finding fault and bossing! It don’t hurt anything what I’ve been copying. Those old papers aren’t worth shucks.”

“They must be worth something to somebody, or they wouldn’t pay you to make copies of ’em,” said Nettie with ruthless logic. “You *know* that. Even if you didn’t know out of your own head that it wasn’t right to do things like that, you might know it wasn’t by being so scared you’d be found out. Something’s sure to be wrong about what you do, if you’re afraid to have people know it. That’s one sure test.” And seeing that Millie did not at all subscribe to this argument, scarcely even took it in, she brought forward another far better calculated to influence her. “They might put Jim in jail for that.”

Millie’s beautiful eyes grew wild with terror — not on Jim’s account; anything but! “Oh, *Net!*”

she gasped out: "They — they wouldn't come after *me*, too, would they?"

"How do I know what they might do? You better be on the safe side, anyhow, and stop it," Nettie counselled her; and the other promised in sheer panic.

Privately, however, Nettie had sage doubts both about Jim's liability to a jail sentence and the permanence of Millie's good resolutions. The worst that could happen to either one of this precious couple would be the loss of his or her job, she surmised sharply. If Millie got any inkling of *that*, she would go on with her unrighteous copying regardless of forty promises. But wouldn't you have supposed she would have known better in the first place, Nettie asked herself in disheartened bewilderment. Her own stark common-sense indicated the paths of right and wrong unhesitatingly and unhampered by any such tricky faculty as imagination; how anybody could do wrong without knowing it, or knowing it, could beguile himself into pretending wrong to be right, at once dumbfounded and angered her. She was not really hard natured; but the same streak of hardness in her that rendered her immune to temptation prevented her from feeling the most remote sympathy for those who succumb. To Nettie they were not so much pitiable weaklings as incomprehensible fools; and: "There, but for the Grace of God, goes Nettie Stieffel!" expresses a humble and humane understanding of which she was incapable.

She found out by persistent questioning that what Millie had been copying was chiefly concerned with manufacturing firms and business houses among the bank's customers in the Mexican and South American

trade. Millie made lists of the notes they got from the Antipodes and discounted which she passed on to Jim; once when he had been going away somewhere for a week or more — she thought to a prize-fight in some Western town — he had given her an address where she was to send them to somebody named Schwartz or Schmidt, she said vaguely, and she believed he had something to do with the German consul. She remembered the names of some of the foreign people — Perez Hermannos, Calle de la Aduana 14, Buenos Aires, Argentine — Ceballos y Cía, Miramar 78, Valparaiso, Chile, etc. And that was about all that Nettie could get out of her.

“If Elmer had known, he’d have told you just the same as I have. But as long as you’re going to stop, I don’t see that you need to say anything to him about it.” Nettie told her, meaning only kindness. But all unconsciously she must have assumed the attitude Millie resented as “boss-y,” for she flared out with feminine inconsistency:

“I’ll tell Elmer anything I feel like, thank you! You don’t need to tell me how to act with Elmer. It wouldn’t make any difference to him what I did, anyhow. He’s not going to be ashamed of me, like some fellows are of their girls!”

The next instant she repented and retracted; Millie was seldom actively ill-tempered — altogether the contrary. She had an amiable disposition, and was moreover cautious. “Oh, I didn’t mean that, Net! That was real hateful. I was just mad, and I’m all kind of upset anyhow. I take it back. Say, you don’t mind, do you?” she pleaded with caresses.

“Goodness, no! It’s all right!” Nettie assured her briefly. But in her heart of hearts, she knew

that it was not all right; in her heart of hearts, she was shrinkingly aware that a form had been given to something hitherto formless, yet ugly and menacing.

## XII

**D**URING these days, the newly engaged couple — the two couples, for they all joined forces as often as ever — used to meet as before, going to and from the offices and lunching together at the Kentucky Kitchen; and on the afternoons of Saturdays and holidays Randon and Nettie still took their long walks. If it occurred to the young man with distasteful persistency that a certain degree of intimacy with his betrothed's family was entailed upon him, and that in conscience and common decency he ought to make some effort or show some disposition towards knowing Nettie's people better, he was capable of putting it out of his mind with the excuse that formalities — or informalities, for that matter — were not necessary; they knew all about him; some day, of course —. But, in the meanwhile —.

In the meanwhile, Mr. Randon, apparently with the common consent, never went to the house, and was not expected there. "It's too kind of crowded, and no place to ourselves, I keep telling him. There wouldn't be much satisfaction in it. You see how it is," Nettie explained to her Aunt Julia, a little over-anxiously. Heretofore her live-and-let-live creed had never exacted or volunteered explanations of anybody's conduct, however bizarre; and this departure may have been illuminating, but Julia gave no sign of surprise or undue interest. She acquiesced with

an absent-minded grunt and went on sewing; and undoubtedly this indifferent acceptance was a relief to Nettie. But left to herself, the older woman sighed. "It's beginning already!" she thought, with a despondency which, however, did not affect the activity of her needle and tape-measure; the indulgence of emotions is a spendthrift luxury that right-minded poverty will not allow itself. Lucky or unlucky, sad or glad, Julia staved ahead at her work. She did not feel justified in making any inroads on her narrow horde, those savings and scrapings of years against the bogies of old age and sickness that camped forever on her door-step, to contribute to the girls' outfits. "You'll just have to take my wedding-present out in sewing," she told them, not without a wistful regret, much more profound than anything they themselves felt. "You both of you know how it is. 'T aint like I wouldn't give you the grandest kind of things if I could. But seeing as I can't *give*, next best is to *do*, I guess. Now don't you go buying any more of them expensive camisoles and shimmies, Millie. I can cut a pattern off of 'em and make a full set for the cost of one of 'em at Sawyer's. You just get me the goods, and I'll show you. That'll leave you more money to put on your stockings and things I can't make." It was good advice, and Julia lived up to her word by toiling over these daintinesses every spare hour of her day and often into the night, with her patient shoulders bent over the machine, her patient, ageing eyes smarting with the strain. The spectacle, no matter how touching, need move no one's sympathies; there was nothing Julia desired less. Any misguided commiseration she was likely to meet with the information not too gently delivered that no-



body was making her sew for the girls, she did it because she chose to; she liked it; and there was something else she always had liked, too, namely: for people to mind their own affairs!

Mrs. Frank Stieffel was one of those who never offended her sister-in-law either with too much sympathy or with offers of help. As busy as she was with the house and family on her hands, how could she find time to get her niece and daughter ready to be married? All Rochester Avenue understood her position — or, if not, it was not for want of being told. You could drop into the Stieffel kitchen any time and hear all about it, while all of to-day's dishes and some left over from yesterday stood stacked on the sink and stove awaiting washing, while the milk-bottles soured on the back step where they had been standing since the delivery-wagon's visit at five o'clock that morning, while Frank slept stertorously in his chair involved in a kind of halo of odors, stale pipe and Irish stew combined. Mrs. Frank would be reading *Hearths and Homes* and powerfully interested in an article giving directions how to make beads out of rose-petals dried, reduced to pulp and indurated; necklaces and ornaments constructed therewith were attractively unique and brought fabulous sums. "My, I do wish I had the time to try it once!" she would sigh. "It would be lovely if I could make some money on the side — well, will you listen at me talking that slang! I pick it up from the children, you know. But I just wish I had the time and stren'th to make a little something. Nettie getting married'll make a difference in the money coming in, of course — not that I'm complaining. It's all right, and I'm glad the child's going to be happy. Nettie's

just the grandest daughter that ever was!" Her faded eyes filled. It was the truth; poor Maggie never uttered a word that could be construed as complaint; and as to anxiety about the future, she was not in the habit of entertaining any sentiment so depressing.

No date had been set for either wedding, as yet; but one day something occurred which had the effect, ultimately, of hastening Millie's. That is to say, Mr. James Peabody frowningly and forcibly imparted some news at directors' meeting Tuesday morning before the regular business of the institution was opened, which brought forth equally frowning and forcible comment from the other gentlemen; and there was some asking of questions which however, Mr. Peabody could not or at any rate did not answer. He had discharged the young man, he said; he merely wished to put the bank people on their guard, as since this thing had come up he had inquired around and discovered to his astonishment that banks in other cities had had a similar experience. Personally, he would admit to having formed a strong prejudice against the German code of business morals, ever since their insurance firms laid down on paying their San Francisco fire losses; to his knowledge they were the only people that did so. This other thing seemed to be exactly in line with their practices on that occasion.

And that was all. Nobody ever knew exactly how or from whom Mr. Peabody's information came; it might well have been from young Marvin himself for he was as loose-tongued as most braggarts and sometimes took a drink too much, besides. The average cheap rogue is also a cheap fool. Anyhow, there was Jim out of a job, though with half a dozen loud, easy tales to account for it; and here, alas, was

poor little Millie Aymar haled up before the judgment-seat in Mr. Marklein's private office and argued at with grave words about duty and loyalty and business-honor appalling to hear even if very imperfectly understood. No one knew anything about this episode at the time. Corporations may not be so soulless, after all, as we have been drilled to believe them; at all events the authorities at the head of the Travelers' And Traders', in the person of their vice-president, conducted themselves towards this culprit with clemency and an obvious disposition to make allowances for her sex and youth.

"A bank," said Mr. Marklein, in the course of his instructive little oration, "is, in many respects, the confidential clerk of its customers. It has no business to pass around information of this sort; that is not what a bank exists for. Such a policy would be suicidal, even if it were not distinctly unscrupulous. It seems that these — er — these data that you — er — collected, were communicated through the German government channels to firms in Hamburg and Bremen, all over Germany, in fact, and greatly facilitated their getting into touch with these South American people and the rest with propositions underselling the people here who had previously been doing business down there. Now of course, you're just an inexperienced young girl, but you can see that there's something not quite straight about the whole transaction, can't you?"

"Well, I didn't know what they were going to do with the copies. Anyhow, they've got a right to sell things cheaper than other people, if they want to, haven't they? Their own things?" said Millie plaintively and artlessly.

“Why, certainly. But the point I’m making is that this bank can’t have anything to do with it. Of course, we *could* and keep out of the penitentiary, but now, don’t you *see* that — ?” Mr. Marklein patiently went over the exposition again while Millie drooped before him, exquisite as a flower but — whether knowingly or not, who can say? — conveying somehow a suggestion anything but flower-like what with her delicately rounded figure, her soft, appealing eyes, the troubled movement of her young breast. Mr. Marklein was a man grown and in business before she was born, respectability encased him like an armor — strong oak and thrice-laid brass! But would he have given so much time and trouble to a young man? I doubt it. As a matter of fact, he finally interrupted himself in a most unwonted perturbation, adjuring her not to do *that!*

“Of course you feel badly and — and I suppose you ought to feel badly — er — I — I mean you’ll take the lesson to heart — you’ll never be led into doing anything of the kind again. But I know you didn’t mean any wrong — it was just ignorance. Now don’t — er — don’t do *that!* It’s all over, and nothing to cry about.”

“I’ll go a-w-way,” sobbed Millie; “I’ll go right a-w-way. You won’t want me round any more after this — you w-won’t t-trust me —”

“Oh, that’s all right. You can keep your position just the same. After this you’re going to be more careful —” Mr. Marklein found himself much inconvenienced by the persistently recurrent thought that he had never before seen any woman look pretty when she cried; generally they made unbecoming faces and their noses swelled up and got red. This little thing,

on the contrary, was more than ever cute and forlorn, like a little drenched bird out in the rain. Women ought not to enter business; they weren't made for it; they weren't — er — hard enough, he said to himself with vehemence.

“I just thought it would be so nice to have a little more money. I — I like nice things,” sighed Millie.

Impossible to deny it; she had genius. Old Emil actually caught himself on the verge of asking her how much she was getting, and raising her a few dollars! He had no idea of raising Nettie Stieffel, though she was a pearl of office-girls, and moreover as clear-headed and clean-handed about commercial ethics as himself. Nor had that scrawny, anæmic, irreproachable, middle-aged lady Mrs. Emil Marklein, received an increase of allowance for this long while; the master of the house considered himself to have always shown ample generosity in her direction.

“Well now, maybe you'd better go home for to-day and — er — rest up — and — um think this all over. It's after hours, anyway,” he recommended rather hastily, looking at his watch; and got up straightening his coat involuntarily. “Yes, that's it! You can go home. No need to tell anybody about this, you know. As I was saying, it's all over now, and — er — in short, least said, soonest mended, hey?”

“I'll be good,” said Millie childishly. “And I think you've been just ever so kind, Mr. Marklein. I don't believe any of the other gentlemen would have been so kind; and they wouldn't have explained it so I could understand. They'd have just scolded. I'm glad it was you.” She raised a pair of shy, devoutly grateful eyes under the most beautiful long, thick curving lashes in the world. The vice-presidential

heart performed an acrobatic gambol which the vice-presidential head witnessed with a kind of alarmed and sneaking pleasure.

“Yes, that’s just it — you’d better go right home —” He touched one of the buttons on his desk to summon somebody — anybody — it did not matter whom or for what. To your tents, oh Israel! And he breathed freer when Charles the bank porter, a colored man of unexampled decorum, appeared. At the Civic Club dinner that evening, Mr. Marklein in conversation with the man on his right, reiterated his conviction that women should not go into business; that sort of association with men was in a sense abnormal, and sure to be productive of — er — complications. “Miss Nettie,” as he called her, had been intimately active in his own office for upwards of a year, a young and unusually good-looking girl — but Mr. Marklein did not have her in mind when he spoke of women in business. He never had her sex in mind at all on any occasion, not even when he was dictating a letter to her or giving her an order; and so, naturally, was not aware of an inconsistency between his practice and his rather recently formed theories.

Millie almost told him about her approaching marriage — almost. The fact might be a trump card in the way of excuse and appeal, or it might not; in either case, there was no profit in playing it when — to keep up the metaphor — the trick could be taken otherwise. And it swiftly became apparent that the trick could be taken, sure enough, much more economically, in a familiar way, her standard way — so to call it. She went in to the interview really very

much frightened; she came out with an augmented sense of power. That this power was based upon something distinctly carnal, shared with the brutes, something for the human mind to survey with philosophy perhaps, but without self-esteem, troubled Millie not the least; indeed her perceptions could not carry her that far in analysis. She herself could not have been called coarse; but she employed the coarsest feminine weapon instinctively, without actually recognizing it, taking a pride in her skill that was at once naïve and pathetic, and — to the rest of us who are all of such fine, high natures of course — no doubt a little horrible. Men were certainly awfully easy, Millie thought, going home on the cars; she laughed to remember how afraid she had been of that old grouch Mr. Marklein. He turned out as easy as all of them — easier! She always *had* had an idea that the old ones were easier than the young ones; now she knew it! The trouble was a girl couldn't get *at* the old ones; she wasn't ever thrown with them; being in an office with a lot of other girls didn't count. You had to get *at* them by themselves, of course; like to-day. And then, nine times out of ten, they were married already. Mr. Marklein, for instance — Millie gave a short sigh. Simultaneously with her complacent self-approbation at having forborne to mention her own prospective marriage — it wouldn't have done any good; would have been much more likely to spoil everything, for that matter — there crept into her mind a poisonous discontent with that very prospect, with Elmer, with her life as it seemed to be planned. And yet she had no faintest glimmer of a desire to change it. No, it was settled;

she would marry Elmer. Afterwards — who knew what might happen afterwards, thought little Millie hopefully.

All's well that ends well; and Millie might have stayed on with the Travelers' And Traders' until this present moment, had she chosen; but she did not choose. Perhaps she was tired of work, perhaps only out of temper with it, and desirous of a change. At any rate Elmer presently found himself urging her to hurry up with her preparations and set a date with a fervor and impatience which, to tell the truth, surprised him — at odd times when he stopped to think about it. In point of fact he was not quite ready himself; he would have liked to have had another year's savings in bank. But now he all at once began to feel jealously insecure about Millie; the indulgence with which she regarded other men's attentions and their admiration thrust itself upon his notice more and more. If Millie took care that it should, nobody could have proved it from her attitude; she complained amiably that Elmer just kept at her and *kept* at her until she simply had to give up and agree to being married right off, if only to keep him quiet!

It was a cool, bright day in early fall when the wedding took place. The house was in gala array; Julia paid a colored lady to wash and hang the lace curtains; Nettie paid the caterer who furnished the ice-cream and lady-fingers; and Julia and Nettie together in their scant leisure somehow accomplished all the other cleaning and cooking necessary with help from Mrs. Weaver and sundry neighbors whose anxiety to be useful was hampered by their equal anxiety not to seem officious or inquisitive or interfering. "Not that Mis' Stieffel would mind! A person could



go into her house and turn it upside down right under her nose for all she'd care, she's that easy-going," they said to one another with some good-natured contempt. "But Julia's an old maid, and you know how *they* are, and Nettie's kinda independent — I wouldn't want to do anything that would look like I was trying to run 'em." Millie, of course, did not share these labors; brides-elect are supposed to have enough on their minds and hands already without washing and polishing the furniture, deciding where the hat-rack had better be put, and helping to take down the bed so that the front room can be used ceremonially. One of the girls gave her a linen-shower, resulting in a profuse supply of handkerchiefs and small doilies; Elmer's present was a wrist-watch, a variety of toy new at that date; and Mrs. Hector McQuair sent a dozen of fine towels, hand-woven, fit for Queen Mab's bridal-chest, with intricate monograms wrought in French embroidery, each a bas-relief of minute and delicate stitches, a work of art in its kind. That young girl had all the tastes of a gentlewoman, and it was exactly the sort of gift she would appreciate, the old lady thought. In a long career of tactful guessing, it was her worst, perhaps her only mistake. Millie was wretchedly disappointed. More linen! And nothing but old towels at that! People would only see them in the bathroom; and think what a job it would be to keep them done up and looking like anything! Well, she was not going to undertake *that*; she would simply have to put them away, and much good they would do her!

Ranny McQuair officiated as best man, balancing Nettie as bridesmaid; in Rochester Avenue parlance, he and Nettie stood up with them. It is a mere mat-

ter of phrases, and one is surely as good as the other. "Say, don't wear one of these frock-coats, for the Lord's sake!" Elmer adjured him energetically. "They make me think of a funeral every time I see one; a man hardly ever puts one on except to be pall-bearer, you know. I expect old Pop Weaver will be all diked out in his, and if he just don't forget and tell the folks they can all step up and take a look at the remains as soon as the services are done, I'll be thankful," the young man interjected with a nervous grin; he was as excited and unsteady as the average expectant groom. "I haven't got one myself," he added, returning to the frock-coat theme. "I'm just going to wear a business-suit — it's new, of course."

Randon promised him with laughter; and when the great morning came, went around to Rochester Avenue, costumed as directed. Nettie peeped over the top of the freshly laundered sash-curtain in the bedroom where the bride — flurried for once with all the color gone out of her face — was mechanically dusting on superfluous powder and dusting it off again; Nettie peeped out and caught sight of the groom and his best man on the front walk, the latter being introduced by somebody to somebody — she had no eyes for their uninteresting figures. Randon was taking off his hat — smiling — shaking hands — saying something; the girl's heart gave a sudden bound of pride. He looked so tall and straight and — and *nice*, she thought incoherently; his coat set so well to his shoulders — a first-class tailor, of course, but other men's coats did not fit that way, first-class tailors and all. Other men looked dressed up when they had on their good clothes; Randon never looked dressed up in anything, his clothes seemed to grow on

him, he never seemed to know anything about them, and yet they were always the right kind of clothes. And see him take off his hat! Nobody else could do it just that way. They disappeared under the porch roof and she could hear her mother's voice, high-pitched, and hysterically giggling in welcome. Julia heard it too, as she knelt on the floor, twitching and pulling unnecessarily at Millie's skirts.

"That's them, ain't it? The boys, I mean? Your Maw said 'Hello, Elmer!' didn't she? I do hope to gracious her back hair ain't coming down, or the snappers on her placket opened, or nothing like that happened to her," she grumbled through a mouthful of pins; "she's so worked up she don't know whether she's standing on her head or her heels."

"Her hair's all right. I fixed one of my nets on her good and firm. You just look out for your own hair," Nettie commanded with brusque playfulness. "Millie's all right, too. Aunt Ju, do leave her be. Stand up here and let me look you over yourself."

"You'll be the only person that does. It ain't worth while," said Julia shortly; but she scrambled to her feet, secretly pleased to have Nettie turn her about and twitch and pat and pull in the approved fashion.

One of the younger children came to the door and announced through it in a piercing stage whisper: "Say, Reverend Stegemiller's here, and he says whenever you're ready. And say, Pop says ask Nettie where she put his mustache-cup, because he says he —"

Millie opened the door and jerked the youngster inside fiercely. "Well, you don't need to blatt that all out so everybody can hear you all over the house!" she admonished him in an undertone also

but of a quality which made no more noise than a slashing razor and was as mercilessly sharp. "Now say it, whatever it is!"

The boy said it, disarming her by adding a compliment that had all the force of thirteen's inimitable candor. "Gee, you look swell, Millie!" said he; "some bride, hey? Elmer's got on a silk four-in-hand, real light gray. And oh say, Net, you just wait till you see *your* fellow! You won't hardly know him. He — why, he makes all the rest of the bunch look like thirty cents —"

Julia cut him off harshly. "Don't you say that, Roy! There ain't anybody better than your own folks, nor looks nicer. Don't lemme hear you talk like that —"

"I wasn't saying anything," protested Roy, justifiably amazed and outraged. "What's eating you —?"

"Shh! Now you keep quiet, and mind what I'm telling you!"

Nettie listened to the duet, wondering. Aunt Julia must be pretty tired and nervous, she thought, to take the poor kid up so unreasonably. But —. She read something, pained, wistful, almost frightened in the old spinster's eyes as they rested on her for a second; and a phantom that she had tried to believe laid for good, rose up and stalked through the far recesses of her mind in renewed and hateful vitality.

### XIII

**T**HE Hands-Aymar wedding attained the eminence of mention in the "Society Jottings" column of the *Sunday Observer*; Millie cut out the paragraph and pasted it on the back of the marriage-certificate which (embellished with sprays of roses, lilies-of-the-valley and orange-blossoms wreathed in and out amongst the lettering, that an artistic friend obligingly painted for them) they had framed and hanging up in the bedroom of their flat. Of the actual ceremony, Millie remembered little or nothing in her preoccupation with her own appearance. The unanimous verdict of the company about it was most gratifying; seldom, they said, did a bride look so fresh and blooming; the girls were almost always completely fagged out with the arduous business of getting ready, and at the final moment did not do themselves justice, so to speak — besides all but flying to pieces with nerves. Millie was an exception; by the time, accompanied by Nettie, and with eyes suitably and becomingly cast down, she reached the foot of the stairs, she had recovered her natural poise. As a rule she was at her best in public; and in earlier days of church and school entertainments had earned the name of being the most reliable performer. Now, as then, the audience stimulated instead of unnerving her. It was Nettie who was awkward and embarrassed in the crowded little parlor, with everybody within arms' length, her mother sniffing and the child-

ren shoving in the background, her father with his mild patient face looking unnaturally clean, shaved and surmounting an unaccustomed collar, Elmer pallidly self-conscious, Randon standing close beside her, seriously attentive to the service, the only person in the room about whose bearing there was nothing artificial. It was an exhibition at once of sincere reverence and spontaneous good taste; Nettie, with a kind of boding reluctance, found herself confirming Roy's report. The young man stood out and apart from the rest of them; it was through no effort or desire of his own, for he was the least self-assertive of men, as Nettie knew, but the contrast was as striking and inescapable as if he had been a spectator from another planet. She was not proud now; instead a sick dismay flooded her. All at once she hated the scene; she hated the Reverend Stegemiller for stumbling amongst the phrases of the Book of Common Prayer with which the poor divine, who professed another creed, was calamitously unfamiliar; she hated Millie for her theatrical pose; she hated the crayon enlargement of Grandma Lindtner's photograph, and the golden oak bookcase with the little mirror at the top of it; she hated the smell of coffee gushing in from the kitchen — where the colored lady was on duty — and mingling with the smell of cologne and violet-water and sachet-powder and moth-balls with which every woman present except herself seemed to be, as it were, seasoned, she hated Nettie Stieffel and wished that she was down at the bank where she belonged, where she was happy, useful, in the right place —

“ . . . Into this holy estate these persons — er — these *two* persons now present come to be joined. If any man now present — er — if any man can show

just cause why they may not be joined let him — er — why they may not be joined together let him now speak, or else forever after forever — or else forever and ever aft — or else hereever after — *hereafter forever* hold his peace!" read the Reverend Stegemiller, making pretty heavy weather of it, but floundering through somehow.

"Well, they'll be good and married when he gets done! Saying everything over three or four times —!" Nettie remarked inwardly with her habitual intolerance of the incompetent. She had gone to All Souls' one Sunday evening to hear the music and in some curiosity about the church of which Randon was a member — a member, that is, after the easy fashion of American men; and even she had been measurably impressed by the lofty and beautiful wording of the service and could now recognize a kinship between that and this. It was "real church-y, the *churchiest* thing" she ever heard, she confided to Randon afterwards; and for that very reason, she now decided, eminently unfit as language for everyday purposes. Look at all the trouble Mr. Stegemiller was having! He always got along well enough in his own church, at weddings and funerals and so on, though you'd think it would be harder to make up a prayer out of your own head than to read it off from a book. Millie had insisted on the Episcopal ritual; *everybody* was married by it, she said. Nettie made up her mind that *she* would have the squire, and get out of all this fuss; she wasn't going to spend this much of her own money on a wedding again, and she certainly wouldn't let any one spend theirs; Millie didn't mind, but she wasn't Millie —

" . . . And forsaking all others keep thee only unto

her so long as ye both live — er — *shall* live —” recited Mr. Stegemiller; and he read on: “*The Man shall answer: I will.*”

The Man accordingly answered — in a husky whisper that could scarcely be heard three feet away; when it came to her turn — his reverence carefully reading the italicized direction as before — the Woman made her response clearly and unflinching, though with a suggestion of shrinking shyness that was very pretty.

It was over at last, the conclusion of the ceremony being accompanied by a prodigious hissing and sputtering from the direction of the kitchen; the colored lady, taking the universal human interest in a wedding, had deserted her post and left the intervening doors ajar while she looked on, and in that moment the coffee boiled over. Mr. Stegemiller followed up the benediction by a jovial recommendation to Elmer to kiss the bride, and upon the young man’s complying with a diffident peck at her cheek, followed *that* up by kissing her himself with resounding gusto. Nettie could tell that Millie was furious, but she put a good face on it; and directly there was so much kissing going on that the ministerial salute was, so to speak, a mere drop in the bucket. Everybody talked and laughed without in the least knowing what was said or what the laughter was about; the older women — pardon! — the older ladies wiped their eyes and returned to their normal practices of gossip and it is to be feared occasional backbiting; the men pumped Elmer’s hand up and down with a merciless fervor of congratulation; the children clamored underfoot. Julia dashed out to the ice-cream freezers; spoons tinkled, there began to be a great clapping and slamming of Mr. Weaver’s folding-chairs. He had sup-



plied two or three dozen of them free of charge in the goodness of his heart. The legend: "T. W. WEAVER, MORTUARY PARLORS" stencilled on the under side of the seats was insistently conspicuous. Mr. Weaver explained to Randon that this was an imperative necessity.

"You got to have 'em marked plain where people can't help but see it, or you wouldn't have a chair left inside of six weeks. Nobody *means* to take what ain't theirs — it isn't *that!*" he said magnanimously. "They just see a handy little chair that folds up flat like these pic-nic chairs and the ones they have on the Coney Island boats, you know, and they forget and think it's one of their porch-chairs and it's been around the house always and belongs to 'em!" He talked a good deal to Randon, having as he said, "taken a shine" to the young man, and thinking that he looked lonesome.

What Randon felt, however, was not lonesomeness, but a strange kind of enforced detachment, intangibly and invisibly walling him off from the company. Try as he would he could not penetrate it or put it aside; it was as if he had been a figure under a glass dome. He was aware of them eyeing him, murmuring about him one to another, as people eye and murmur in an exhibition room; and when they met him it was with an air so obviously unnatural as to puzzle and perturb him. They conveyed the impression, not of hostility, but of what seemed to the young fellow a singular and causeless inability to meet him on his own ground; apparently they could no more remove the glass dome than he; it interposed in spite of, and yet somehow because of them. Particularly was this the case with the women; men accept one another more

readily, and Mr. Weaver was most refreshingly and likably plain, kindly and sociable. It was impossible for Randon to understand why Mrs. Weaver, for instance, could not emulate him. "Let me take that," he said, advancing his hands to the huge tray of lemonade-glasses and cups of coffee she was passing around; but she evaded the gesture precipitately.

"Oh my, no, thanks, Mr. McQuair. I'm helping out purposely. I'm used to it anyhow, and you ain't," she said, giggling uneasily without mirth, and went on. Randon made humorous complaint to Nettie.

"Here, give me something to do, won't you? Nobody will let me, and I'd like to be made use of."

"They think you don't know how. You've been waited on all your life, you know; and everybody here does their own work," said the girl in a harsh voice, looking at him queerly. She did not know what impelled her to this speech; there was a dull pain at her heart. It was not lessened by the perplexity, the faint recoil she discerned in her lover's expression.

"Even so, if you'll just tell me what to do —?" he began awkwardly; her guess was right in so far as something he sensed in the thought underlying her words troubled and humiliated him; it seemed unworthy of her.

"No, never mind. There isn't anything. You don't need to help," said Nettie in the same hard manner, and she too went on, leaving him in his isolation. Her ministrations were so active and incessant thereafter that she had no time to speak to him again, scarcely even to look at him, it seemed; and Julia felt called on to remonstrate.

"Nettie, child, do go in there and set down along-

side your beau and have a saucer of cream yourself. Nobody'll think anything of it to see you two setting together. You'll be tired to death. They're all helped now and anyways if there's anybody else comes along or wants a second time, I can 'tend to 'em. I'm going to have mine out here, anyhow. Go on in and rest yourself. *He's* in there, ain't he?"

"Yes. I was just talking to him. He wanted to help, but I wouldn't let him. I didn't want him coming round here in all this muss."

"Uh-huh, that's right. He might get something spilled on him — cream or something on his pants. That fine gents' goods spots something awful," said Julia, pushing a string of hair out of her eyes with one hand, and digging the spoon down into the freezer with the other. Nettie startled her by a sharp laugh.

After the refreshment period, there occurred a species of pause in the festivities, when nobody seemed exactly to know what to do, or what was expected next. Randon overheard one lady suggesting to her husband in an energetic whisper that they make their adieux and go home, because, as she very practically pointed out, they couldn't visit with the bride and groom the whole rest of the day; and furthermore, as it appeared, she designed to cut up a half peck of tomatoes before getting supper, and set them to drain for catsup. Mr. Weaver genially offered a resolution that they all drink Mr. and Mrs. Elmer Hands' health in a final bumper of lemonade, and then the old folks clear out so as to leave the young ones room for dancing; he had a Victrola, and if a couple of these husky boys wanted, why, they were welcome to go and get it and some first-rate rag-time records that were there; his house was right next door. The suggestion

brought forth a round of applause, but otherwise fell rather flat; no one, amongst either the old folks or the young apparently possessed the initiative to act on it. Mrs. Weaver could not go anyhow; she was now helping to clear away, as busily as she had previously helped to serve; judging by the eagerness with which this job was sought, it relieved the embarrassing inaction for many of the older guests. Then somebody had the happy thought to propose singing. It turned out upon a canvass, that the only songs whereof both words and tune were familiar to the entire company were "Auld Lang Syne" and "My Country, 'T is Of Thee," which were accordingly performed in chorus, led by Mrs. Stegemiller, who sang soprano in the Seventh Baptist choir. Poor Frank, especially, enjoyed the music; not having been able to go to church in years, it did do him good, he said.

What with one thing and another, the afternoon wore by until it was time for Millie to go upstairs and change into her travelling dress; they were going to Atlantic City. This was the signal — not wholly unwelcome — for a general uprising and scatteration; they departed in pairs and groups, only those remaining of the waggishly-inclined younger element who had laid plans for clandestinely attaching old shoes stuffed with rice to the rear axle of the bridal hack, and placards lettered staringly with the announcement: "WE HAVE JUST BEEN MARRIED." Randon did not join these conspirators; after repeated attempts he at length succeeded in waylaying Nettie to ask her when he would see her again. She was on her way from the back porch with Millie's silk umbrella from which she had just humanely emptied a quantity of rice introduced into its folds by one of

the humorists; and she hesitated a bare second, not looking at him, with her lips compressed, while she re-rolled the umbrella and snapped the band.

“You can see me most any time — down-town or anywhere,” she said indifferently.

The young man looked at her, hurt and bewildered. “Yes, but this is Saturday. May I come to-morrow — come here, I mean?”

“If you want.”

“Of course, if I’ll be in the way —?” said Randon, glancing about with some confused idea that the house would probably be in the disorder that he knew irritated her. “But we can go and take a walk somewhere —”

“You don’t have to come a foot inside the house. As long as you’ve kept out of it this long, I guess it won’t worry you to death to keep out of it a while longer. Of course you *had* to come inside to-day,” said Nettie.

Her tone and manner literally stunned him. What was the matter? What had happened? Characteristically, the young fellow supposed himself to be at fault somehow; he could not guess what he had said or done, but it had been borne in upon him more than once during the course of this day that with the best intention in the world he might ignorantly give monstrous offense. “Well then, at three o’clock? And you’ll send me away without mercy if you’re too tired. I — I don’t want to persecute you,” he said humbly.

Alas, for once his chivalry served him ill! In Nettie’s present unreasoning and unhappily suspicious mood, it smacked to her of hypocrisy. He was using one of those facile devices with which his kind of people perpetually smoothed over all uglinesses; they

believed themselves entitled to sneer at or make fun of you as much as they pleased behind your back, provided they were polite to your face, she thought bitterly. And inwardly she was actually capable of charging him with deliberately taking advantage of her with his "fancy manners" as she branded them; he knew very well that she could not talk back to him in the same style; he knew *she* wasn't that kind; *she* was honest, *she* always meant every word she said, *she* — poor Nettie! And poor Randon, for that matter! The times were sadly out of joint.

However, Randon was so little aware of the nature of the complaint against him — which indeed would have been almost beyond his understanding — that he only told himself regretfully that he and Nettie were due to tiff some time or other; he had probably behaved like a chump without knowing it, and then too she was all tired out with this infernal wedding, so that something had angered her which she might have laughed at, any other time. He was glad that Millie was married at last and out of the way; he had never fancied her much, and now said to himself roundly that Hands was, if anything, too good for her. Hands was a nice fellow; he deserved to have a nice wife and home; whether he was getting either, Mr. McQuair had sagacious doubts. Millie was dazzlingly pretty, she was bright enough, she had very sweet ways, *but* —. But, thought Randon profoundly, she was "on the make" that girl. She thought altogether too much of herself and was altogether too determined to have the best of everything; she'd keep Elmer with his nose to the grindstone. Still, if Elmer was suited — Randon ruminated philosophically, and filled his pipe. Now Nettie — all was not right just now, but

he would find out what the trouble was and make up with her to-morrow. Mrs. McQuair noticed his abstraction, but in her ancient wisdom said nothing, and asked no questions about the wedding.

#### XIV

**T**HE next day when, in the mid-afternoon, Randon reached the house, it exhibited that disconsolate aspect peculiar to every lately abandoned scene of merry-making. Twists of waxed paper and a vagrant box-lid or two blew about the lawn, and clung among the dead flower-stalks in the beds along the foundation; there were dangerous little slippery islets of mashed chocolate-drops dotted over the porch floor and steps; and rice, confetti, cake-crumbs, withered rags of flowers everywhere. In the hall, Mr. Weaver's chairs, folded and unfolded, singly and in stacks, dominated a chaos of other furniture; there was bedding draped at random, and in the middle of the floor a wash-basin, two-thirds full, the surface of the water mantled with a curdled scum of stale suds, contributed a strangely unwholesome touch, all its own. Some one had improvised a table and sideboard out of the lower step of the stairs, as was evidenced by the presence there of one of the caterer's buckets with the cream-canister inside emptied save for a spoonful of unappetizing fluid deposit in the bottom of it; there were two or three saucers with more of the same deposit, and the inexhaustible cake-crumbs over all. A person wouldn't feel right having a lot of cleaning and straightening-up going on on Sunday, Mrs. Stieffel explained, in a weakly smiling flurry, clutching a kimono together around her neck and shoulders; she had opened the



door after a prolonged wait and sundry alarms and excursions, the noise of which penetrated quite distinctly to Randon as he stood outside. It continued and now resolved itself into a shrill rumble of casters charging across the upstairs floors, the stubborn and shoving progress of other articles of furniture un-castered, and brief breathless commands, warnings, exhortations.

“Nettie, she *would* go ahead with some of it, though,” said Mrs. Stieffel with another feeble smile. “You know how Nettie is. Of course with all I got to do, the children and Mr. Stieffel being an invalid like he is, I simply got to let things go sometimes, but Nettie being in an office she’s got office ways, and she just won’t rest till everything’s in place. You’ll have to excuse my appearance, Mr. McQuair; I ain’t hardly had time for anything.”

Randon murmured something in undue embarrassment; he was miserably conscious that he did not want to see Nettie’s home looking thus, and Nettie’s mother — who for her part was not in the least embarrassed — inadequately kimono-ed, amiably voluble, repelled him against his will. “Maybe I’d better not stay —?”

“Now, Mr. McQuair, don’t you go imagining you put us out one minute! We love to have you come in any time just like it was your own house. I never was one to make company of anybody, let alone *you!*” cried out Maggie. She was thoroughly sincere; it never entered her simple head to worry about comfort, style, conventions in her own house or elsewhere; and her heart warmed to Randon, like the hearts of almost all the women of her age. Some quality they perceived, or fancied they perceived in the youth, won

them unconsciously. "It don't make any difference to me our being a little bit upset, if it don't to you," she assured him cheerfully. "I always say people got to take us the way they find us. You just set down anywhere — well, I guess you better not go in the parlor on 'count of Pop — Mr. Stieffel. We couldn't take the trouble to put his bed up last night, we was all so tuckered out; we just fixed him a mattress on the floor; that's how these blankets and things come to be around airing. Don't look quite as swell as it did yesterday, does it? Watch out for them saucers, Mr. McQuair. Roy and Helen was having a party with some of the left-over cream. We just been picnicking to-day, you know, we didn't try to get any regular set-down meals, and there was a whole lot of stuff that oughta be et up, as long as we had to pay for it anyhow, and it don't keep any len'th of time. I guess the caterers do that on purpose — get you to order too much, you know, only I don't see what they'd make by it; they might sell it to somebody else, it can't make any difference to them who they sell to. But everybody says it's always that way — a lot left over, I mean. You just set down anywhere — wait till I take that old basin out of your way. I told Minnie she should take and empty it directly Pop — Mr. Stieffel — got through, but that's how children do, you know. They can't remember anything two minutes. Well, we don't always look like this, Mr. McQuair, but you understand, anyhow. I'll tell Net you're here."

Randon gingerly selected what appeared to be the steadiest chair, while Mrs. Stieffel, holding the wash-basin at a perilous slant, proceeded to tell Nettie by the admirably direct and effortless method of bawling

up the stairs in a high, carrying sing-song: "Oh — oh, Nettie!"

"What?"

"Come on down. Somebody's here t' see you," answered her mother roguishly, glancing and smiling at the young man.

"Oh!" Randon heard her put something down; she seemed to hesitate, standing still for an instant, then moved to the stairs.

"For the gracious' sake, ain't you going to take that rag off your head?" said Miss Julia Stieffel's voice, loudly sibilant. Nettie made a negative sound. She came down rather slowly, holding some sort of loose rubbish bundled together in a newspaper, said "Hello" to Randon from the landing, and interrupted his greeting by a sharp warning to her mother.

"Look out, Ma, you're letting that water slop all over —"

"Oh, it's just water, it won't hurt anything," said Mrs. Stieffel easily, bringing the basin to a level. She started for the dining-room. "Well, I guess you young ones ain't crazy for me to stick around —"

Randon began to speak, but Nettie interrupted him again. "Wait till I take this stuff and put it somewhere, will you? Where you want me to put it? It's that stuff of yours, you know. I didn't like to throw it out unless you said to, but it was on the closet-floor in the childrens' room and they'd messed it all around into their shoes and everything," she said, pushing by him. The newspaper contained a quantity of loose black flakes of some unguessable material, part of it coagulated in misshapen pills, little and big; there were also tangled nests of black pack-thread and hair-like gilt wire, a pair of scissors with one blade broken

short off, a teacup about half full of malodorous paste stiffened to the texture of cheese, three or four cloves, and a diminutive carton lettered: "LIGHTNING CORN-PLASTERS."

"What do you want done with it? It doesn't look to me as if it was much good — sort of stale, isn't it?" said Nettie, addressing her mother brusquely.

She did not look at Randon; he stood by, a helpless witness of intimacies he would have given worlds to avoid witnessing, his disrelish not lessened by a stealthy consciousness of comedy in the scene.

"*Well?* What do you want done with it?" repeated Nettie, slightly elevating her voice with an effect of exasperated patience.

Mrs. Stieffel gave an exclamation of concern, surveying the accumulation. "Oh my, it's those beads! I declare I forgot all about 'em. You make them out of rose-leaves — I got the rule for 'em out of *Hearths And Homes*," she interpolated in an explanatory parenthesis to Randon. "According to *them*, they were perfectly grand, and just as easy as *easy* to make, only a little complicated, of course. But I don't know — mine wouldn't stick together somehow; I must have got the paste too cooked — or maybe not cooked enough. I guess you've simply got to experiment till you get everything just right." Here Mrs. Stieffel shifted the basin to one arm, a position not unattended with risk to its contents, and explored amongst the beads doubtfully. "'F I just had the time — *oh, for the goodness —!*" She caught sight of the corn-plasters with a start of consternation that sent waves of cold suds slapping on the floor with a resounding *plop*, but Maggie paid no heed; she "palmed" the box with the dexterity of a conjurer, casting a shamed

glance into Randon's face, while the color inundated her own. "Well, I'm sure I don't know how *that* come to be in there," she murmured in painful confusion. "You just got to excuse it, Mr. McQuair — I don't know what you'll *think* of us —!" It was plain to him that the casual presence of a box of corn-plasters contained for her all the elements of impropriety, not to say indecency.

"Want me to throw 'em out, then?" demanded Nettie, as before.

"Why, I don't know — of course these first ones were a failure, but I b'lieve I could get 'em right the next time. Mis' Weaver said she'd order a necklace. I might work up a nice little trade right around here — don't you b'lieve I could?" said Maggie wistfully, appealing to Randon. "You can't judge by these, but they were awfully pretty in the magazine pictures."

"Well — I — I don't know much about jewelry — what ladies like, and all that — but it seems as if the — the beads might be very odd and interesting —" Randon was lamely stammering, when Nettie cut the discussion short ruthlessly.

"Oh, he's just saying that, Ma! You can't make anything out of that stuff, and it would be just trash if you did make it. Besides you'll never finish 'em — you never finish anything. Here, let me get by you!" She pushed out of the room.

Her voice and manner had been the opposite of gentle, but Mrs. Stieffel gave no evidence of hurt feelings; instead, she looked at the young man, and spoke not without a note of indulgent admiration: "Isn't that Net all *over*, though? She's always just that quick and decided."

Randon had nothing to say. The spectacle of ineffi-

ciency, whether conscious and hopeless, or as happily visionary as Mrs. Stieffel's, is one of the most pathetic in life to the average humane beholder; we do not always realize that if pitiful to look upon, it must also be, in the long run, maddening to live with; doubly maddening to one of Nettie's temperament. This episode was only one of a hundred that almost daily tried the girl's soul; but Randon did not know that. He could not see that the very qualities he most admired in her of courage, and resolution and loyal tenacity of purpose defeated a conscientious struggle to be patient with her mother. Nettie, even in a shrouding bungalow-apron with a fillet of towel binding up her burnt-brown locks, still looked the clean, graceful, dauntless Diana she had always figured for him; but in the young man's dismayed view, she acted like an underbred girl in a bad temper. And about what? Good Heavens, about what was this ignoble outburst? The truth was brutal enough, no need to tell it so brutally, no need to tell it at all, for that matter! And to her mother! And before him! All the ancient inhibitions of his caste, of his sex, rose in rebellion; and impelled, no doubt, by that Mephistophelian opportunist who tenants all our minds, whatever misgivings he had hitherto concealed from himself, now rushed clamorously into the foreground of his thought.

Mrs. Stieffel wavered out of the room, and presently Nettie came back. She closed the door, and began to untie the dust-cloth on her head, an operation which prevented her looking directly at the young man. He was still standing, holding his hat and overcoat; and after a moment of silence, managed to say: "You are — you must be very tired."

“No, I’m not tired,” said Nettie, concisely. She got the rag off, shook it out, and folded it, matching corners with meticulous accuracy. “Don’t go to making excuses for me. I’m always just like this. I should think you’d know it by this time,” she added, without acerbity, in her habitual manner, matter-of-fact and straightforward.

“Excuses?” Randon echoed confusedly: “I — I don’t — that is, I’m not —”

“I’m always this way,” said Nettie again, now beginning deliberately to remove her apron. “The house is always like this too, and my father and mother and all of us. I never thought about it before — you see it’s my home and I’m used to it — but I guess it seems kind of funny and *different* to you. You must notice the difference. *I* do, anyhow. I mean, I notice it now. I noticed it like everything yesterday. It did sort of upset me for a while,” she confessed, reflectively eyeing him as if engaged in comparisons which were not unkind — which were, in fact, quite impersonal. “But that was silly. There’s nothing to get mad about. Some people are one way and some people are another way, and that’s all there is to it. You might just as well make up your mind to the differences. It’s something that goes down too deep to be changed.”

All this she said in her most everyday fashion, without the most remote suggestion of effort to control feeling; the wedding, the last play they had seen together, the humors of her day at the bank might have been her theme. Nevertheless there was no possibility of misunderstanding her, even of pretending to misunderstand. Indeed, Randon, who was intrinsically as direct and open as herself, felt no

impulse toward pretenses; all he could think of, momentarily, was the fantastic cruelty of their position.

“If I have hurt you — if I was —” he began at length, but Nettie arrested him with a little gesture.

“No, *indeed!*” she said earnestly. “You never hurt anybody’s feelings in your life, Randon. And nobody else has said anything, either,” she went on quickly, forestalling him. “They wouldn’t, you know,” said Nettie with gravity. “People don’t want to mix into other peoples’ business and make trouble. At least most people don’t; everybody in general’s pretty nice, *I* think. No, it isn’t anybody’s fault, and nothing’s happened. It’s just that I’ve been thinking, my own self, that we made a mistake, and we ought to stop before we make a worse one.” She finished folding the apron in a tidy roll, having uttered the last words with a pin between her lips which she now took out and quilted dexterously into the bundle, facing him meanwhile with steady eyes. She divested the situation of every shred of romance; Randon was being given back his freedom in perhaps as easy a way as, all things considered, could be contrived; the young fellow’s main distress was the secret consciousness that he was not distressed at all! He was relieved, and the relief shamed him. But no man on earth, were he ever so much in earnest, could play the broken-hearted lover to such a Juliet; sighs and pleadings and passion would be ludicrous, even if their essential falsity had not revolted him.

“I think we’d better kind of make a new start, just plain friends, you know,” said Nettie. “We’d never get along together, married, in the wide world. If we’d been exactly suited to each other, it would have



been all right, even if your folks and mine didn't — didn't — well, *mix* — you see what I mean? But the truth is, we aren't so terribly congenial. And getting married — it's taking too big a chance." Nettie shook her head wisely. "I wouldn't feel right to go into anything so uncertain. And I don't believe in this hit-or-miss marrying and getting divorced when you get tired of it. I know you don't either. That's one thing we *do* agree about."

Randon stumbled amongst phrases about his own unworthiness. He meant them; he seemed to himself contemptible. All the while he knew that, as the world goes, he had done nothing; to release himself from this unlucky contract had never occurred to him. Nettie herself was dismissing him, as scores of girls have dismissed scores of men ever since the game began; all was right and proper and according to precedent; but somehow that fact did not avail to rehabilitate him in his own eyes. The trouble was that Mr. Randon's self-conceit had been severely shaken; he stood convicted of gross instability. First he had wanted Nettie with all his might; and now with all his might he could not make himself want her! He asked her forgiveness, dimly foreseeing that he would never obtain his own.

After he had gone, Nettie slowly climbed the stairs, carrying her two bundles. At the top her aunt confronted her, searching her face with eyes of harrowing anxiety. "Nettie, I heard it, I heard every word!" she whispered. It was not an apology; the thought of apology never crossed her mind. Reticence and a regard for privacy were not essential, by Stieffel standards, either to comfort or polite living. "Did you mean it?" whispered Julia tensely.

“Did I mean it?” Nettie repeated after her. “Yes, of course I meant it. I don’t say things I don’t mean.”

“Well, I didn’t know — I thought perhaps you didn’t re’lize — I thought you might not know how it sounded —” faltered the other. Logically and consistently, Julia should have been immensely relieved at this turn of events; had she not been the first to perceive the unsuitability of the match, its promise of catastrophe? But now, as she strove to read her niece’s features, miserable pity and disappointment distorted her own. “Oh, Nettie!” she quavered on a sob: “He won’t come back! He won’t ever come back! Did you know that?” The tears ran down.

“Why, yes, I knew it. Don’t take on so, Aunt Julia! It’s all right,” said the girl. She had no tears, though without doubt the fires were all gone out on some queer little altar within her; the splendid image — which very likely had clay feet! — lay prone and shattered; the shrine was cold. Poor Nettie, being mercifully devoid of imagination, did not set to pitying herself, or indulging in tragic metaphors. It was enough for her that he was gone, and would never come back; *that* was over and done with, out of her life for good and all, she thought, comforting and quieting the older woman, unaware of irony.

## XV

**T**HERE is, after all, no such tragic difficulty about adjusting oneself to life, at twenty-five, even when a part of it, perhaps the chief part, seems to be definitely over and what is left sterile and desolate. Nettie found herself getting up and going to work with the same interest as ever and taking the same zest in the day's accomplishment, and coming home, as usual, reasonably tired, not dissatisfied yet promising herself to do more and do it better on the morrow. She was no hack, though taking down stenographic notes and transcribing them afterwards with much hammering on the typewriter may present every appearance of hack-work on the surface. What raised it above that class was precisely what raised Nettie herself above the ordinary class of office-girls; it reflected her plain intelligence and that other quality eluding definition which has been called temperament. She had a turn for business as distinctly as another young woman might have had for art. Order, accuracy, and that fetich of the American world of affairs, "getting results," had always been her happiest and most successful preoccupations; she was only a little less happy now, and still successful.

In one — her only — moment of weakness, she went and bought an extravagantly handsome set of furs, muff and neckpiece, with some of her hoarded trousseau-money; it was a concession, a species of balm which might well strike the philosophical

observer as pitiful and funny, however effective; but, in fact, no sooner was it done than Nettie herself denounced the performance. What had she been thinking of? All that money! Well, there was one consolation: the furs would last a good while, five or six seasons at least in their present style, and five or six more made over. Looked at that way, they were still a folly, but a kind of sensible folly. And to insure their prospects, she kept them locked up when not in use; there was a risk of informal borrowing otherwise. "Lucky Millie isn't at home here any more — though I suppose it's sort of mean for me to feel so about it. But I never could be sure of having a single thing ready to put on when she was around," she reflected. Indeed, it could be seen at a glance that Millie was no longer around. The little room, albeit Nettie now shared it with the next youngest Stieffel daughter, was a model of cool neatness. Nettie could impose terms on her junior, and they were severe terms as regarded cleanliness, tidiness and the inviolability of property rights.

She saw Randon, of course, from time to time; passing on the street, he would raise his hat to her — that movement the sight of which always caused her a foolish pang. Nobody else did it as he did, nobody! Their encounters, however, became less and less frequent; she deliberately chose an hour for going and coming when she knew he would not be on the car; and, as it happened, Randon presently ceased to tenant the Macdonald Building and the desk in Judge Stanley's office. Nettie heard that he had set up for himself at the other end of town in a quarter populous with young members of the bar, convenient to the Court-House. The news came through her Aunt

Julia who continued to officiate as Mrs. McQuair's seamstress, just as if no other connection had ever been contemplated. They had the habit of each other, and neither one knew how to break off.

"She ain't ever said anything to me, and I ain't ever said anything to her," Julia reported. "What would be the use? When you're old like her and me, you can't fly up and make a change all of a sudden. I need the money and she's gotta have clothes; and we got the same ideas about things and what style suits her and how much it's worth while to spend, and everything. So what's the use?" Julia did not express her private conviction that Mrs. McQuair was too overjoyed at the recent event to care about so unimportant a detail as her sewing-woman's association with it. The old maid did not resent this attitude; her own pride was satisfied. Nettie's position was unassailable; the most waspish, the most cattish of the "Society people" could have nothing to say about the girl who, of her own accord, had "turned Ranny McQuair down"; the mere fact of the turning-down established Nettie as unique, distinguished, superior. "They all know she wasn't fishing for him anyhow — so who cares?" said Julia to herself in an oddly vindictive triumph. "Even if all his folks are fairly dancing on their heads, they're so glad it's broke off," she would sometimes finish with a sigh. Her own state of mind perplexed her; she seemed at the same time to be glad and sorry!

Other members of their family and circle were in no such uncertainty, notably Mrs. Elmer Hands. Seldom had the equable Millie been seen so "put out" as when, on returning from the honeymoon journey, she learned about the broken engagement. At first

she insisted that it was nothing more than a lovers' tiff; Nettie and Randon would make up — they *must* make up — it was too silly — why, Nettie could not even say now what they had quarreled about! Come back? Of course he'd come back — that is, if Nettie would merely crook her little finger; he was aching for an excuse to come back. And what was the sense of Net's being so stiff? If that wasn't just like her, always afraid as death of being half-way nice to a man, for fear he'd think something, or somebody else would think something. And so on and so on, actually getting quite flushed and shrill-voiced, almost bitter in her irritation. Nettie was astounded at this display of temper, at the vehemence and pertinacity with which Millie urged a reconciliation.

“It isn't any question of making up with him, Millie,” she tried to explain. “We didn't have any fuss. I just told him plain out that I didn't believe we'd get along. And I still don't believe it. It's all settled, and I'm not going back on what I've done. You never knew me to, so you might as well let me alone. There isn't anything in it for you, anyway — my marrying him, I mean. I can't see what call you have to get so excited.” She was indeed incapable of comprehending what obscure ambitions had been sown and flourished in Millie's soul by the promise of the McQuair alliance, and what a disappointment it was to find that growth blighted; social climbing with its incidental exercises such as making stepping-stones of other people would forever be an unknown art to Nettie. Millie knew it well; but the other's honest wonder aroused her caution, and recalled her to herself.

“Why, of course it isn't anything to me, Net. It's

you I'm worried about," she said in a different voice, an affectionate and distressed and pleading voice. "I hate to see you two ruining your lives just because of a whim or a little scrap that doesn't mean anything. I know, I just *know* you could fix it all up in a minute, if you'd just let yourself *go* once. And you know you aren't going to get another fellow like Ranny McQuair right off," she advised, sincerely enough, with a shrewdness so characteristic that Nettie laughed in spite of herself. It was good to see Millie familiar and natural again; the pose of affectionate solicitude was disquieting somehow, it even repelled Nettie a little. She was attached to the other girl, and only required that she should always be the same lovely, irresponsible and unmanageable creature; if she was also vain and self-indulgent and not too clean-minded, Nettie did not care. Millie was Millie.

"That's all right, Millie, don't you worry about *that*. There are others!" she said with vast significance; it was intentional and premeditated roguery for which she was rewarded by the other's instant and to Nettie most comical alertness.

"Oh *Nettie!*" she breathed. "So *that* was why —? Who is it? Mr. Marklein? Once or twice I *thought* he — *is* it Mr. Marklein?" As a sinking swimmer might clutch at a life-belt, so — in a fine figure of speech — did Millie clutch at the idea of Mr. Marklein. Match for match, Marklein or McQuair, there was not a pin to choose; the social horizon opened once more.

"*Mr. Marklein?*"

"The young one I mean, of course," said Millie impatiently. "Mrs. Marklein probably never will die; she's one of those sickly people that hang on till the last horn toots. *Is* it him?"

“No,” said Nettie shortly, her face clouding. All the salt went out of her joke, somehow; that was like Millie, she said to herself unreasonably, always thinking things.

The truth was that Emil junior, who was well known to have a taste for good looks in the opposite sex as exhibited by candy-counter young ladies, waitresses, hat-check dispensers and others of like unpretending occupations including, it was rumored, the artists of the chorus and the vaudeville stage — Emil had more than once cast a favorable eye in Nettie’s direction. This was not during Randon’s time when he observed a discreet distance — he had no desire to enter into that particular sort of competition, it would appear — but before, and most markedly since. Nettie was uncomfortably aware of the young man’s gaze, his determined and persevering notice. The word notice was fraught with profound meaning in Nettie’s circle — in other circles too, perchance; how should I know? To notice or be noticed conveyed no light intelligence on Rochester Avenue. And here was the younger Marklein stopping at Nettie’s desk every time he went in or out of the office, hanging around until she emerged at the closing hour, hinting at luncheons and automobile excursions, or pressing invitations on her outright, *noticing* her, in short by every device known to man, in the face of the most emphatic discouragement.

For Nettie did not like him. He was fine-looking, he had plenty of money and spent it freely, he was probably no worse than the next man, he might be in earnest or with a judicious amount of holding-back and tantalizing he might be made to be in earnest; but Nettie would have none of him. That quality of hers



which Marklein senior would have described as a level head ruled her even in her rare yielding moods. At first she regarded his behavior with a tolerance perhaps inborn, perhaps the result of long familiarity with the masculine point of view; with such indulgence not unmingled with amusement and some contempt does one man behold another's essays in Emil's field. If he wanted to make a fool of himself, in Heaven's name, let him! It was only when he became insistent, stubbornly and as it seemed to her stupidly refusing to take her denials, that the girl began to be irritated, even covertly uneasy, though she would not have admitted it. She afraid of Mr. Emil Marklein? Forget it! She had never been afraid of a man in her life, and she certainly wasn't going to begin with *him*. She knew how to take care of herself; and if he didn't watch his step, she'd show him.

"No, I don't care for chocolate-creams. I don't care for any kind of candy," she would respond coolly, taking care to be audible all over the outer office, to Emil's low-voiced suggestion; and the young man would retreat, under a fire of subdued giggles from the other girls and the casual male clerk or bank-messenger who was pretty certain to be within hearing, red and furious yet still obtusely bent on conquest. He used to wonder naïvely how in — in never mind what! — Rand McQuair whom nobody would pick out for an enterprising fellow along these lines had ever managed to get next to this girl, condemn her! — only that was not the verb which Mr. Marklein employed. He would hardly have been pleased to know the comparisons which Nettie sometimes made between their methods of approach.

Emil was not the only pretender. For now, sud-

denly, that old-time acquaintance and would-be suitor of Nettie's, Jim Marvin, turned up again, floridly dressed, swashbuckling as ever, after one of those absences which invariably follow upon the failure — or sometimes the success — of some *coup* with gentlemen of his caliber. This same power of instantaneous and complete disappearance is one of their most enviable attributes. What becomes of them in the interludes? They are not in any sort of durance; these magnificent adventurers manage to keep on the hither side of the law as surely as the petty ones. But what becomes of them? Nobody knows. They depart, they vanish, they are temporarily obliterated; anon they return and recommence their splendid courses — and still nobody knows where they have been or how they have fared during the silence. Jim turned up looking like d'Artagnan, and Rupert of Hentzau, and Captain Kidd all rolled into one; Nettie ran across him on a street-corner, and he fell into step by her side jauntily, sure of his welcome.

“Hear you and our pussy-footed friend have decided to call it off?” he remarked presently, after some conventionalities, shooting an oblique glance at her under his drooping lids and thick, wicked black brows.

Nettie did not pretend to misunderstand; she adopted his own tone, defiantly. “You don't mind asking questions, do you?”

“Well, when I want to know anything for sure I always go to headquarters. It's so, isn't it? You needn't worry about breaking the news to me gently; I can stand it,” said James with graceful irony. He gave her another look before which, against her will, the girl's own eyes wavered; there had been moments before this when Jim daunted her inexplicably. His

challenge was so bold and unashamed. "Maybe you'll remember there's somebody else on earth now," he said; and before they parted announced that he was coming out that evening, with a cocksure finality that made no pretense of considering her preference in the matter of visitors.

He came; he came again; he took Nettie out, and met her elsewhere. Ere long he put on something of the victorious, proprietary air which might have been expected of Randon, but which Randon, alas, had never known how or been able to assume. Strange to say, Nettie did not resent it. Although she and the family and the whole neighborhood knew nothing good about Jim Marvin, although Millie — whom he met with perfect assurance and gayety — could justly have held a grudge against him, although Elmer had no more reason to trust or like him than before, although his habits and the way he made his living were alike under suspicion — notwithstanding these and a dozen other valid objections to him, everybody not only suffered Jim, but looked upon his courtship with good-will — with much more good-will than they had ever accorded to that youth of irreproachable family and morals, Randon McQuair!

And why not, to be sure? Jim was not shy of Rochester Avenue, its society and its homes. If he was a black sheep, he still belonged to their own fold, calling the men and many of the girls by their first names, invading the ranks of matrons at the Maplehurst Social Club dances, and forcibly prevailing on them to dance with him, brazenly joking Mr. Weaver about the undertaking trade, slapping poor Frank Stieffel on the back and treating him to a stogie, calling Miss Julie "auntie," loud, jolly, arrogant, ineffa-

bly at ease. Nothing more natural than his popularity and the other young man's lack of it. For verily I say, most of us would rather associate with a rag-picker we know than with a duke who doesn't know us, and personal merit has nothing to do with it.

By this time, Mr. and Mrs. Hands were established in one of the neighborhood duplexes, with a kitchenette, a gas-range, a brass bedstead, a bird's-eye maple dressing-table and such other of the trappings of the newly wed as Elmer's budget would compass. Millie was not exacting in the matter of home comforts, and perhaps had other and what she deemed better uses for the money Elmer gave her than to spend it on house-furnishings. Certain phrases about simplicity and culture, the trammels of convention and the higher planes of thought which had survived in some corner of her memory through years of disuse like goods left in storage, from childish days in the California colony, she now brought out and aired, finding them remarkably up-to-date, spite of their antiquity. The truth is that sort of material never does go entirely out of style, and with an extensive assortment of catchwords one may pass for original and brilliant anywhere, at any era; nothing endures like shoddy. Their vocabulary, let it be said at once, was all that Millie adopted or inherited from the society of b'hanas and b'hanees; to have put in practice their somewhat liberal theories as they themselves had done would have seemed to Millie at this stage of her career the height of destructive folly. Merely as an economic measure she would have refused to share a husband with some other lady, and as to sharing property —! As it was she kept most of Elmer's salary; at first the

young fellow was well enough satisfied that she should. If, after a few months, the fact that his home markedly lacked the comforts and attentions he had a right to expect, that in plain English he was not getting what he paid for obtruded itself upon him and he began to make some demur, outsiders knew nothing of it. Even the family knew nothing; they themselves were not used to a well-kept house. Millie did not go to see them very often; but then she seldom went to see any of her aforesaid associates nowadays. She had become a member of the All Saints' congregation — which, next to All Souls' was reputed to be one of the wealthiest and socially most exalted in the city — and had joined a number of the charitable organizations it sponsored, all of them, in fact, where one incurred no risk of heavy assessments. You might see her at bazaars and suppers, very active at the counters and waiting on the tables, always charmingly dressed, flushed and pretty, sweetly attentive to the elderly people, especially the elderly gentlemen. That amiable old worldling, Mrs. Hector McQuair encountering her on some of these occasions, observed her activities in the beginning with surprise, which later gave way to comprehending and humanely cynical amusement.

“The young woman has the right impulses,” she would say, not meaning, however, that Millie's impulses were towards a life of holiness and good works. “She has the right impulses,” says old Virginia, with a kind of benevolent malice; “but she needs advice. The church-and-charities route is not what it was a few years, say a generation, ago. It has been too thoroughly exploited. Nowadays, I

understand, one must get oneself talked about — in the right way by the right people, of course. And it takes money; but it has always taken money. Yes, she has talent, but she needs advice.”

## XVI

**A**CCORDING to sundry students of life — whose names, though of merited renown, somehow elude the memory — nothing is more strongly characteristic of sex than the differing fashion in which men and women meet and treat economic problems. Let a woman, a good conscientious woman discover that she is over-spending — they say — and she at once begins to retrench in a thousand directions, sensible or foolish, thrifty or penny-wise, but almost always painful; whereas a man, convicted of extravagance, never dreams of scrimping, he merely decides that he must make more money to keep pace with his enlarging tastes. It is a handsome theory and tempts to investigation; but, in the instance at hand, that of Nettie Stieffel, it seems to be disproved. For Nettie, finding like the rest of the world about this time that the family expenses were steadily exceeding the family income with the mounting prices of shoes and groceries and coal and what-not — Nettie, I say, did not immediately plunge into scared economies on her own part or attempt to force economy on the household. She was too experienced for the latter measure in any event; waste and mismanagement at home were nothing new to Nettie, and she had long since recognized the futility of trying to regulate that unkempt domain. “A person can’t attend to two jobs at once,” was her verdict; she must go on contributing her share, pouring water into sand, and she always contrived to do it without too much self-sacrifice.

She was no drudge; she was a hard-headed, capable young woman, daily growing harder-headed, and possessed of but one desire, to become more capable. So that when the increasing cost of living began to be oppressively evident and to be talked about on every side, she was affected in what the philosophers just quoted would have us believe a most unwomanly manner. No inordinate pinching and scraping for Nettie! Instead she set about expanding her resources, for all the world like a man. She hunted up stray jobs of typewriting, addressing, catalogueing, indexing, sets of books to open, muddled accounts to straighten; all her holidays and spare hours went in work, she got up early and kept at it late, a marvel of efficiency and reliability, and to all appearances tireless as a steel spring.

“I like to make the money — and I like to work anyhow,” she would reply briefly to all remonstrances that she would wear herself out, that she would ruin her eyesight, that she was getting thin, that she had a gray hair — at twenty-seven! — and so on. “People can’t keep their looks forever, and I’d a whole lot rather lose mine getting thin than getting fat. I keep myself nice, and I always mean to. What gets me is that if I was a man, nobody’d be worrying about me working. You’d all be going around, saying: ‘Oh my, isn’t he a steady young fellow! Tell you that boy’s going to amount to something!’ Just because I’m a girl —!” Nettie burst out laughing at this quaint inconsistency. Years of business-life had finally taught her the value of good-humor and patience; and besides who will say that she was not really happy in her relentless activities? All together, they brought in enough to keep her not only square with



expenditures, but even infinitesimally ahead of them, a result that filled her with a kind of moderate and prudent satisfaction. She was too ambitious to be complacent.

Her favorite dream — if any process of Nettie's matter-of-fact mind could be called dreaming — was that of one day establishing a business-school — a college — Stieffel's Female College — no, Stieffel's Commercial College for Women. She would not take men; she did not believe in the co-educational plan, Nettie said firmly; girls had to be taught in a different way from men, to say nothing of the nuisance both girls and men invariably made of themselves whenever you tried to mix them. There would be classes in stenography, book-keeping, penmanship, every branch of office-work so conducted as to be of the utmost practical benefit to the student; she would make it her specialty to turn out experienced clerical help — no cubs and green hands would come from *her* place. If the girls did not show talent, or at any rate the will to learn, they would be dropped, that was all there was to it! She wouldn't fool with them. She really couldn't; it would undermine her reputation. The course would be two years; she calculated that it would take an ordinarily bright girl two years, and besides that was one way to get a good line on them. If a girl had the sand to stick it out for two years, she was all right, and Nettie would get her a job. Otherwise, no! She wouldn't do a thing for them, and she wouldn't give them a recommendation. There would also be a post-graduate or normal course of one year, featuring instruction in the business vocabulary of foreign languages and foreign business usage; it would be for women who had already been

in business some years and had learned all the routine stuff from the ground up, as you might say — like herself, for instance. Almost all the regular colleges had some department on that order. She would probably teach personally some of the more advanced classes, if managing the whole thing did not take her whole time — of course she would hire competent instructors, but she would be the boss, you bet —

“Oh my, Nettie child, it kinda scares me to hear you talk that way,” her Aunt Julia would break in at this point. Julia was the sole person to whom Nettie confided her Alnaschar projects, and the poor old maid was reminded of her own disastrous adventure along approximately the same road. “I thought I could do it, too — run a place, I mean. It’s different from what you think. Just because you can do a thing first-rate yourself ain’t any reason you can make somebody else do it. Honestly, there’s times when you get to thinking there ain’t anybody in the world that’s got any sense, or ’ll tell the truth. And your money keeps going—! It’s awful!” Julia shook her head with tragic eyes, biting off a thread between her worn old yellow teeth amongst which a file of false ones in front gleamed eerily white and monumental. “Don’t you do it, Nettie!” she implored. “You just stay satisfied with what you got.”

“Why, I *am*. I’m not thinking about doing it now, you know. I’m not fixed to — not until Roy gets old enough to work, anyhow. I’d have to borrow the money to get started, and I don’t want to do that right now,” said Nettie — and that airy reference to borrowing plunged her aunt into another panic. Borrow! She saw them all in the alms’ house, with potter’s field on the horizon — not so unfamiliar a per-

spective, alas! More than once in Julia's hard-working life had she contemplated it. She began to consider Roy a safe-guard, and the family were astonished at the warmth with which she now argued against his leaving high-school after the first year, and getting something to do. As accustomed as they were to Julia's help, it seemed unnatural that she should not welcome a lightening of the common burden. Her only backer in the family councils was Millie's husband. Elmer said solemnly that Roy ought to finish his education.

Elmer also was the only one to raise any objection to Nettie's varied industries. It was all right, he would even admit that it was necessary for her to get outside work, but — here Elmer would purse his lips and frown knowingly, and remark with significance that he had *seen the world*. Certain things didn't look well; might be all right, but still they didn't look well; made people talk. Nettie should not stay over time, and come home late. He mentioned the owl-car in guarded tones; most people to whom one offered extra work as an explanation for the owl-car would simply wink the other eye. They would say that no girl needed extra work *that* bad. He had *seen the world* —

“Well, my goodness mercy, I've seen it too, if it comes to that,” said Nettie sharply. “I began every bit as young as you did. I'm not afraid of anything happening to me, nor of what people say, either. That just happened one night, and there wasn't anybody on the old owl-car except two darkies with white-wash buckets, both of 'em asleep. And Jim was along anyhow.”

She spoke with some defiance, rather expecting

more criticism; but, after an instant, Elmer only remarked with a species of reluctant approval that Jim was hard-boiled enough in all conscience, he wouldn't let anything happen to her, anyhow. His attitude towards Jim and Jim's attentions typified that of their whole community, even in some measure Nettie's own attitude. Everybody knew all about Mr. James Marvin — which is to say that nobody actually knew anything about him. They accepted him, however, where they would have unceremoniously rejected an alien scoundrel; Jim was their own. Not a man on Rochester Avenue would have believed him for a second or trusted him with a dollar — upon any legitimate, open and above-board business, that is. But we are all, even the best of us, even the most upright of Rochester Avenue husbands and fathers, poor frail creatures and who knows of what guilty little secrets Jim was the custodian, or how many trivial crimes he had farthered? I think honest men would have a dull and difficult time getting along without the dishonest ones. It is only fair to say that Jim was a decent sort of Mephistopheles, never betraying a confidence or exacting tribute for his silence. Perhaps with a truly Mephistophelian humor he regarded the missteps of the godly as a particularly spicy joke. Occasionally he would even steer some sinner back to the ways of righteousness out of either a wary self-interest or sheer irresponsible good-nature. As when, for example, after taking Mr. Weaver's surreptitious ten dollars and operating with it across the river in those shady retreats to which he had the entry, he returned it multiplied to seventy-five but steadfastly refused to repeat the experiment in spite of the other's excited pleadings.

“Nix! Nump! Not again!” says Jim, waving a repelling hand. “Once is a plenty for *you*, Weavil. You’re the kind that a little luck is the worst thing in the world for. You don’t know when to stop,” says Jim, with the air of being himself a pattern of virtue and self-restraint! “Just supposing somebody got on? It wouldn’t make any difference with *me*, but a man like you — good-night! Nobody wants a sporting undertaker. Nope, I tell you. Take my advice and lay off the ponies, Weavy. Or get somebody else to do your plunging for you. I’m through.” It was a sound argument; Jim had nothing to lose in the way of reputation, whereas the head of a funeral-parlor — the thought of public exposure chilled Mr. Weaver’s blood; it may be that for one moment he envied the other’s devil-may-care independence. But, knowing no one save Jim to whom he dared apply, he perforce gave up the wild game. Very likely he did not relish Jim’s ribald nicknames; very likely he was not at all obliged for his rascally good offices or good advice, for what man on earth was ever grateful to another for helping him to make a fool of himself or keeping him from it? But, setting aside a certain likeableness about Mr. Marvin, it was impossible in the circumstances not to countenance him.

As for the feminine half of society, the mere fact that Jim’s morals were insecure sufficed for them; they had the good woman’s ineradicable fondness for a reprobate. Nettie Stieffel, who had a much clearer conception of his character than any of them, nevertheless shared their weakness. There was this difference between her and the rest, however; Nettie had no delusions about reforming him, nor did she see herself as the angelic being delegated by Heaven to

perform that purifying and ennobling task. Nettie had her opinion, by no means a flattering one, of those sweet and simple ideas and of the women who held them. She frankly and fearlessly liked Jim, making no excuses, knowing all the while that she had no respect for him; in her rare moods of introspection, the feeling puzzled and amused her. He was certainly no better than young Marklein, he might be in a strict interpretation of the laws of conduct, a good deal worse; yet she could not endure Marklein's company for half an hour and shunned him openly without even the affectation of civility. Whereas she and Jim got on famously together, after a Beatrice-and-Benedict fashion, to be sure; they were great pals, according to Mr. Marvin.

That they were not something more was not the young man's fault. He used all the ordinary means of persuasion, making her presents, taking her out and entertaining her brilliantly. He was free with his money, when he had any; "Easy come, easy go!" Nettie used to think. Still remotely wondering at herself, she would suffer his love-making up to a certain point, then cut him off short, as often as not with ruthless laughter, that most effectual of weapons. When she considered marrying him — and she did consider it now and then — she found herself shrinking from the notion of knowing him that well. Going around with a man who got his money in devious ways and letting him spend it on her was one thing; being married to him and living on that same questionable money was another. No, she did not care to know him too well; and besides she quite dispassionately envisaged the possibility of his already having

a wife, official or unofficial, somewhere. In Nettie's own phrase, she "wouldn't put it past him!"

Messrs. Marklein (jr.) and Marvin were acquainted, both of them belonging to that class vaguely described as men about town, though it may be that Jim's stratum was a degree lower than the other young man's. Emil's fortunes were on a sound basis; he might be a prodigal and on a fair way to eating husks with the swine, but for the present at least he was not involved in debts and disreputable expedients. This security gave him the advantage over Jim, if he had known how to use it; but behold how unevenly are the gifts distributed! Emil with his wardrobe and his racing-car and his clubs and his bank-account and everything else that was his all bought and paid for with the older Emil's honest dollars was nothing but a coarse, over-dressed, thick-skulled, potential black-leg; and Jim, an actual one, living by his wits, with his hand in every man's pocket, body and soul on the auction-block for the highest bidder, was not without attractive and companionable qualities, and could even pass for a gentleman under not too close a scrutiny. As to looks, he so far eclipsed the other that a comparison would move the coldest heart to pity for Emil. What chance had that stout, red-faced youth with the enlarging bald spot alongside the lean, dark, spirited Claude Duval of a Jim? What chance with any young woman, that is? None, none in the world. Many a girl besides Nettie would have made the same choice.

"Some day I'm going to set him down good and hard — the fresh dub!" she announced, coming home in a flaming temper after some more than usually try-

ing experience with Marklein junior. "There I am in the office where I can't get away from him, and I can't say anything or go to anybody! He knows that as well as I do, and he thinks he's perfectly safe to be as smart as he wants to. He'd better watch out. There's some things I won't stand for."

"Why, what'd he say this time?" Millie inquired with a natural curiosity.

"Never you mind what he said. There're some things I won't stand for, that's all!"

"Don't forget your job," Millie advised her calmly.

"Oh, I'm thinking about my job all right. If it wasn't for that —! Any way, there's more than one job in the world."

"I don't believe he said anything at all — to amount to anything," said Millie, eyeing her. "You're just mad because you don't like him. It makes a lot of difference who the man is that says the things. Anyhow, getting mad isn't the way to get even with him."

"It's not *your* way, I know," said Nettie with emphasis.

They exchanged a long, steady look of thorough understanding on both sides. "My way's always worked pretty well," Millie said. Nowadays, in these set-tos with Nettie, she enjoyed the incontestable superiority of the married woman; even Nettie must allow that married women knew more than single ones, and that knowledge weighted Millie's arguments which otherwise were the same she had always used. "I don't see why a person shouldn't —" she said impatiently, but with a certain care about her voice and utterance. "Men are the biggest fools ever. You can get anything out of 'em, and make 'em do anything you choose, without — *you* know — without do-



ing anything yourself — you know what I mean. If he's so crazy about you, why, for goodness' sake, why not let him *be* crazy? You can stop whenever you want to. You don't have to do a thing, not one single thing. And it would serve him right, wouldn't it? I don't see why you shouldn't. *I would in a minute.*"

"*Millie Aymar!* Your husband would love to hear how you talk, wouldn't he!"

"Oh, I don't mean now I'm married, of course," said Millie hastily — though it is much to be questioned whether she had had any such restriction as was implied in mind. "I mean if I was a girl again. I never could see any harm in letting a man stick around and spend his money if he was boob enough to. What difference does it make to you what he thinks? They aren't any of 'em any too good. I don't believe in any girl doing wrong — *you* know — of course that would be awful," said Millie primly. A certain hardness appeared around the lovely full curves of her lips, expressing not so much inflexible virtue as inflexible caution. "But there isn't any reason why she shouldn't make the most of herself and take whatever she can get as she goes along. It's hard enough for girls anyhow."

"Well, I guess I don't know how. Anyway, what's the use our talking? We never did think alike about *that*," Nettie said uneasily. She could not take any exceptions to Millie's talk; what sensible person cares to assume the holier-than-thou attitude? Yet she could not escape a disturbing consciousness of something cheap, ignoble and what was more, something essentially false about it. Millie was just talking; people always said a lot of things they didn't really mean, she would tell herself in extenuation.

Mr. and Mrs. Hands were now boarding, in one room at Hubbard's Family Hotel, whose patrons were mostly couples like themselves, or traveling-men presumably bachelors, or middle-aged women teachers in the public-schools, or social workers, or students at the Conservatory — a floating population. House-keeping, even on the lightest of "light" scales speedily palled on Millie; it was too lonesome, too confining, too laborious. Accordingly the small establishment was broken up, the ice-chest went to auction, the china-cabinet to storage; Hubbard's and a folding-bed received the pair and Millie entered upon a life of leisure. It was, in fact, just that and nothing more; excepting the surcease from household cares, Hubbard's offered no advantages. Millie now discovered that living in a boarding-house and having nothing to do in no sense assist one's social progress — rather retard it; but she was beginning to think that social progress was an unbearably slow business under any circumstances. What is Society? A battlemented citadel, a dragon in a cave, a circle of enchantment?

Little Millie had assaulted it repeatedly; intangible and indefinable behind its viewless defenses, it remained untaken. To no avail her youth, her prettiness, her study of manners, her charitable endeavor, her attendance at church, her assiduous pursuit of culture; Society continued unmoved, even unaware of her. The specific trouble, Millie decided, was want of money; without money she would never get anywhere — and when would Elmer make enough, if ever? It took millions these days. Be a millionaire, make a sensation; make a sensation, get into Society. There you have it in a nutshell! Unless

you were lucky enough to have been born in Society, there was no other entrance.

Millie deserves some credit for the power and originality of thought evinced by this deduction; but now, *de fil en aiguille*, she advanced to another which displays her abilities, as it were in full flower, viz: if money lacks, a sensation may yet be achieved by other means, and the sensation's the thing! Music, poetry, the stage, the studio offer opportunities for attracting notice which compare very favorably with those afforded by wealth. To be sure, it appeared on review that all these notoriety-winning trades required more or less preparation, preparation which was reported to be slow and irksome; there were schools and instructors and long, long courses of study; even writing, a profession for which, as everybody knows, no training whatever is needed, looked at close quarters, uninvitingly like work. She hovered a while over elocution, but ultimately condemned it, on the ground that it was not stylish; nobody was an elocutionist nowadays. That seemed to close the list, yet Millie had an obscure and fumbling conviction that there was something else; new arts were coming up every day; there must be something else. By diligent attention to what she considered the smart magazines she gathered that these new arts were created in the simplest possible manner, merely by reversing all the rules of the old ones. The new poets wrote prose; the new scenic artists employed no scenery at all; the new dancers stood still in various postures; the new music earnestly avoided being musical; the new painters and sculptors — but Millie could not make head or tail out of what *they* did. Everybody was a Decadent, & Reactionary, a Post-this, a Future-that. The

vocabulary of the new aestheticism was easy to acquire for a person of Millie's endowment, but upon whom or with whom was she to practice it? Futurist and Reactionaries alike were caviar to Hubbard's; the average boarder did not share Millie's ambitions, and not one of them possessed anything approaching her accurate and discerning social taste.

Elmer, in the meanwhile, was quite satisfied with their lot. He would have liked his own home better than the boarding-house with its semi-publicity, its enforced amenities, but he did not want to make his wife a drudge; he was the usual American husband. He thought he understood Millie's attitude thoroughly. "Never mind, honey, we won't always have to stay in this old joint. Just you wait! The minute I can make it, why, us for the swellest place there is, and our own bathroom and everything!" he declared fervently. "I don't wonder you get to feeling restless. My great governor, seems to me sometimes that if I ever see another five prunes in a saucer, or hear old Mrs. Horne chomping around with those false teeth, I'll just holler out loud and start in to break the dishes! Anyhow, you don't have to wear yourself out, cooking and sweeping — that's *one* thing. Tell you what: this is ice-cream night, isn't it?" He made a wry face, but went on cheerfully — "well, that's better than blanc-mange night anyway. Let's have Nettie and Jim for dinner, and ask Mrs. Hubbard to leave us four sit together at the little table by ourselves. I'll pay the extra."

"All right," said Millie without much enthusiasm.

"We can go to Charlie Chaplin at the Orpheum afterwards."

"All right."

But upon their application for the little table, Mrs. Hubbard deprecatingly revealed that it was already taken, not for that evening alone, but for an indefinite period. A new lady-boarder was coming.

“She was awfully particular about being by herself, and soon’s I found out who she was, I didn’t wonder,” the landlady explained, not without a pleasurable excitement. “It’s that Mrs. Evans — Mrs. Nalia Gruber Evans, you know. There was a piece in the paper about her the other day, I guess you musta seen it. That new Leader or what-you-call-it for this Altruistic Brotherhood church up here on Worcester Place. It don’t sound exactly right somehow to call her the pastor, like you’d call a man, but I guess that’s what it amounts to — her being their Leader, I mean. Of course you can see how she’d like to have her own table and eat to herself — having to do all that deep thinking the way she must, you know. She wouldn’t want to have general conversation going on. So you see how it is, and I’m real sorry I can’t oblige you, Mrs. Hands.”

Millie, however, was not severely disappointed; she had not cared much about having Nettie and Jim to dinner; she felt lifelessly that she never would care to do anything or see anybody in this blighting atmosphere. And when Mrs. Nalia Gruber Evans trailed in that evening, and sat with bowed head over the little table, no doubt in that deep thought which Mrs. Hubbard had forecast, Millie stared with the rest of the room, but stared incuriously. She could not foresee that it was a signally beneficent fate that had trailed in, arrayed as a heavy-set and heavy-featured lady with a faint mustache, and a flowing crêpe costume somewhat soiled yet still majestic.

## XVII

**T**HE church of the Altruistic Brotherhood on Worcester Place had once inspired Mr. James Marvin to quote what may well have been the only scrap of sacred song he recollected from boyhood days of compulsory and not too frequent attendance at Sunday School. "*How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord!*" ejaculated Jim, gazing at the edifice. "By jiminy, that's just what it is, a foundation and not one dinged brick more!" he added with profane hilarity. He was right. The Altruistic counsellors had miscalculated the fund necessary, or had been too sanguine about raising it, or had trusted it to some wholly untrustworthy custodian or in fine had been overtaken by the ill-luck that seems to be forever on the watch for church-builders, so that the structure had scarcely attained to its first story, and had to be roofed over with its walls only a few feet above grade. The basement was fitted up temporarily and the faithful assembled therein, bravely making the best of it; after all, they had a mighty precedent, for did not the earliest Christians hold service below ground in the Catacombs? There were not wanting other points of resemblance to the persecuted forbears; the sect struggled under a tyranny of ridicule, and adverse opinion was their Nero. People are unwarrantably prejudiced against the notion of women in the pulpit — to mention only one indictment — and the Altruistic "Leaders" were invariably women. It must be acknowledged that they oc-

asionally fell into errors which, while not intrinsically serious, somehow ill became a "Leader." Mrs. Evans' immediate predecessor, for instance, after a successful career preaching and teaching, disconcerted everybody by getting married. The shepherd of almost any other religious flock might have got married without a voice raised in disapproval but call it inconsistent, call it unreasonable, call it out-and-out stupidity, call it what you choose, the most liberal of the Brothers balked at a married parson-ess, although as it appeared he had no objection to a widowed one. Mrs. Nalia Gruber Evans shortly thereafter came or was summoned from some city of the eastern states, by what official process nobody outside the congregation knew and few inside; the origin of these lady apostles, what they did before becoming apostles, was likely to be more or less nebulous. In Mrs. Evans' case it sufficed that she replaced the bride, and — in technical language — "made a hit" from the first. She had a sonorous and moving voice, an ample presence — swathed in white or pale-tinted robes with one hand supporting her brow which was her most favored attitude while officiating professionally — and that abundant supply of words which can, on a pinch, dispense with ideas and still make a splendid showing. With such an external equipment, anybody could see with half an eye that she must possess a correspondingly massive and imposing intellectual one; the Altruistics, one and all, agreed with enthusiasm that they had never had a Leader of so powerful a mentality.

Hubbard's found her gravely affable but distant in a style which suited well with her position. They speculated as to how much she was paid, and whether

she had any say about the business management of the Brotherhood, and what her legal status was in regard to such an official requirement as performing the marriage ceremony, and if she or the cult itself supported the doctrine of healing without medical aid. The size and character of the Altruistic congregation, as revealed by the crowd about the church Sunday mornings which people now began to notice, elicited surprised comment; it was as mannerly, as well-dressed and obviously as well-to-do as the average congregation, and much larger. The comfortably appointed automobiles of many members were daily to be seen at Hubbard's door, whether their owners came to invoke spiritual advice of the priestess, or upon some mundane matter connected with theater tickets or a dinner invitation. Human curiosity could not resist such a bait, and more than one of the Hubbard community, surreptitiously to begin with, later quite openly, took to visiting the Worcester Place temple.

"Oh yes, I went last Sunday, and I'm going again. The folks are all Baptists, but I haven't ever been very strict. Some people are so narrow, you know, but I've never been that way. I don't believe in forming an opinion about anything without first finding out all I can about it. I like to see and hear all sides, for and against. That's only fair. And then this religion is founded on the Bible just like any other religion; there isn't anything wrong or contrary to what the Bible teaches in it; lots of people think there must be, but there isn't. The Altruistic Brotherhood have exactly the same Bible as everybody else; they haven't changed a word of it; they just go by other principles of interpretation. Everybody has a right



to do that, so long as they don't inject anything wrong or immoral, you know. Personally, I think they've made a *wonderful* study of it. I don't mean to say I grasp it all — nobody can grasp it all, it's too big. Even Mrs. Evans doesn't grasp it all; she says so herself; she says none of the Leaders claim to grasp it all. If you said you grasped it all, all the truths of the Bible just as they ought to be grasped, it would be like saying you knew as much as God, and nobody wants to be that presumptuous, I should hope! But you can take the Bible and study according to the Altruistic interpretation, and go to a Leader for instruction just like you can in any church. You don't necessarily get to be an Altruistic just because you study their faith. Mrs. Evans told me particularly that they welcome students, they're glad to have people study and investigate with them, not that the church wants more members but because they believe that they themselves get more light, and everybody else gets more light, and the more light people get, the better off the whole world is. I think that's a beautiful spirit. It makes me want to go on and learn more about them."

And who was this promising advocate? Why, who but young Mrs. Elmer Hands, to be sure! It was true that Millie had never during her whole life hitherto showed the slightest interest in or aptitude for any kind of study, let alone Biblical or theological; this complete and astounding right-about-face bears witness to the worth of the Altruistic creed, or to the Leader's abilities, or to certain traits in Mrs. Elmer's composition which have already come to the surface now and then. Along with the rest of the boarding-house and the community at large, Millie

had observed and figuratively taken notes; but whereas a good many — doubtless those prejudiced and narrow sectarians referred to — expressed themselves to the effect that Mrs. Evans had a pretty good thing of it, that anybody with a glib tongue could be an Altruistic Leader, and that the cult itself was all hokum, harmless perhaps, but sensational and silly — whereas there were numbers who discerned only something to scoff at after the above fashion, Millie ranged herself with the appreciative, the intelligent, the open-minded minority who thought there might be something in it. Incidentally — or rather you might say primarily, for it was her first step — she found out to a penny how much there was in it for the Leader, a by no means inconsiderable salary; and over and above that, a certain position and prestige which, while possibly not exactly of the sort Millie sought at an earlier date, were still desirable. There were the fleshpots of the faithful, their entertainments and presents and motor-cars, and the apartment in the swellest of swell locations which they were going ere long to provide for their Leaders. The briefest of surveys must make it apparent that there was no reason why Mrs. Mildred Aymar Hands should not occupy that post with all its advantages, as well as Mrs. Nalia Gruber Evans. She had an attractive personality, a good voice, a talent for declamation, a sufficient commodity of language, a pliant conscience, a small, inexpensive, handy intelligence; and she had specialized in the most profitable and showiest use of every one of these gifts almost since the day she was born.

This was the new branch of sensation-achieving activity whose existence she had divined — or, at least,

it filled the bill to a nicety. That no arduous course of preparation was needed may be inferred from Millie's own words just quoted; one session with Mrs. Evans furnished this apt pupil with all that high-sounding and unanswerable argument. I repeat, unanswerable; for let the intellectual giant who doubts try to answer it! Millie not only went on with the study and interpretation of the Scriptures according to Altruistic principles, she went on, in the vulgar phrase, like a house afire. Thanks to what cynics might have called a native facility at patter, she mastered Mrs. Evans' methods of exposition with scarcely any exertion inside a few months. She did more; she perfected herself in the by-play or stage-business which those same cynics affected to believe characteristic of faker-ism. You might see Millie posed like the Thinker, sweeping about in classic draperies, aping Nalia Gruber with a success which that Leader might well have viewed with alarm. However, Nalia, in another vulgar phrase, was not born yesterday; she weighed a hundred and seventy and was fifteen years older than this formidable disciple, but she knew her job and her world through and through, and was not fearful of being dispossessed. Moreover, there were other Altruistic pulpits besides that on Worcester Place, enough to go around; the creed was of a strong and spreading growth, and good Leaders were at a premium. Mrs. Evans, as has been hinted, was an exceptionally good Leader, capable of discoursing with eloquence, with erudition, with profundity on any subject, or for that matter on no subject!

“Why, I know nothing — but oh, dear friends, does any one of us know anything?” she would ask ear-

nestly. And that was a facer — another unanswerable argument. “ But even knowing nothing, or perhaps because we know nothing, can we not fix our mental gaze upon the Infinite? Nothing exists but Infinity — Infinity which is Cosmic Truth, Cosmic Beauty, Cosmic Goodness. Let us try to grasp these cosmic realities, let us break the bonds in which our errors of belief have shackled us! Pain and Evil have no cosmic existence; the human mind, reasoning blindly from cause to effect, has but apperceived and named the reverse of Happiness and Good, but this reverse is a shadow, not a reality. Wanting the true light, as our text this morning puts it ‘ *Until the day break* ’ we have been obsessed by this error, but now ‘ *the shadows flee away.* ’ We know that there is no Cosmic Wrong in the universe; there is only the non-existent shadow which error has imposed upon our too believing spirits. There is no Cosmic Death; there is Cosmic Life. There is no Cosmic Suffering; there is Cosmic Joy . . . ” etc. When Mrs. Evans resonantly and powerfully intoned such passages, he would have been a clod indeed whom she failed to impress; the reasoning was at once so close, subtle and elevated. Altruistics remarked enthusiastically that “ she carried you right along with her.”

No, Nalia was in no danger of being superseded. Nevertheless, Millie persevered with her “ study,” and even began tentatively to practice when opportunity offered. Rochester Avenue received her in this new rôle with curiosity, and not infrequently with applause which, however, did not connote approval. Most of them were interested simply to see how well little Millie Aymar whom they had known all her life could “ do it ”; on the Avenue she was doomed forever

to be the prophet without honor in his own country. A good many, here and there, had already gone to hear Mrs. Evans, preferring to get their enlightenment from headquarters, and of these one or two had Altruistic leanings but the district, as a whole, Methodists, Baptists and the rest, stood stolidly by the creeds of its forefathers. Mr. Weaver, it may be for professional reasons, never committed himself to an opinion for or against any church though his working-day was so constant a reminder of our mortality that he could hardly be expected to subscribe to the no-death doctrine. "That would be mighty poor business for Weaver," Jim Marvin pointed out with gross mirth. Mrs. Stieffel, for her part, was much impressed with that feature of the new belief; her faded eyes filled as she listened to Millie. "O my, it would be beautiful!" she sighed wistfully. Her husband, on the contrary, when he could focus his attention which was a sad effort for him nowadays, would wear fleetingly a puzzled and worried and even a little frightened look. Frank, whose memory, as is the case with most ageing people, served him better for events years gone by than for those of yesterday, fumblingly recalled the b'hanas and b'hanees of the California settlement at hearing this transcendental talk; some far-fetched, fantastic kinship between it and theirs alarmed old decencies, old prejudices within him. He wanted to know if the Altruistics lived in tents! It was rather pitiful.

Millie did not proselytize; hers was no flaming missionary spirit, and found itself abundantly satisfied with an audience upon whom to try this or that effect. After all, the only genuine convert is he who converts himself; and indeed it was the part of wis-

dom not to assume the responsibilities of conversion. Millie was quite sharp enough to see that whatever doctrines Mrs. Evans preached, the one she steadfastly practiced was that of not getting into trouble with the police or Health Department, as have certain too zealous apostles of advanced ideas heretofore; nothing that that canny Leader said could be construed as an assault upon either morals or medicine, and Millie was fully awake to the advisability of that caution. *She* would never have joined any body of b'hanas! "Oh no, you've got it wrong; you couldn't have followed her all the way through, I don't believe. Mrs. Evans couldn't have said that there wasn't any such thing as pain or sickness in the world, because she knows and everybody knows that there *is*; there's lots of pain and sickness, lots of it. It would be ridiculous to say there wasn't," Millie explained fluently. "What she said was that there wouldn't be any if we could all of us escape from error. But we're just human beings and we can't. Error doesn't mean the little simple mistakes we all of us make every day of our lives, you know — although of course they are a part, an infinitesimal part of the whole tremendous sum. Error is the negation of Cosmic Truth — that simply means universal truth, you know; and a negative quantity has no existence whatever. Why, you can see that for yourself. That's what in the Altruistic's interpretation is called error, and all the things that people call ill-luck or trouble or suffering are nothing but that. Negation of Universal Truth, Universal Goodness. . . ."

Thus Millie in the family circle; when asked to "address a meeting," an honor which had befallen her several times of late, she adopted a more formal,

less chatty style — as did Mrs. Evans herself. But even on those occasions she always suggested a question-box, or some species of homely forum afterwards, again taking pattern from Mrs. Evans. Let there be light, they both quoted devoutly; let everyone inquire, find fault, come forward with the knottiest problems he could think up; the creed was not afraid of honest doubt, honest skepticism; it was a plain creed, for intelligent, plain-thinking people, both Millie and Mrs. Evans and presumably all the other Leaders declared consistently, and with justice as the excerpts from their utterances prove. Could anything, for instance, exceed in plainness and lucidity Millie's exposition of the nature of Error? Yet alas, there were those who could not understand, of course, because in reality they *would* not understand.

“Well, I don't know —” Nettie said, hesitating. “It sounds all right — but I don't know. It seems as if you said that everything bad that happens to us was our own fault, and I guess that's so sometimes —” She paused, and considered. “I guess it's so pretty often. But I know plenty of real nice, good people that never do anything wrong, yet they have an awful time. Take poor Father. What's he ever done to be laid up with locomotor, or whatever it is that's the matter with him? I don't believe he ever had a wrong thought in his life, let alone done anything wrong. What d'you mean, Negation, anyhow? What's Negation got to do with it?”

Millie was not so ready at this date as she became later. And as she sat for an instant defeated, a little out of countenance, feeling for the proper weapon, Nettie went on: “Anyhow, Father never did any negating, that he knew of, I don't believe. But sup-

posing he had and supposing it was the wickedest sin a person could commit, it seems as if he'd good and paid up for it by this time — eleven years helpless and always in pain somewhere! They might let him off now; *I* would if I was running things —”

“Oh hush, Nettie! It ain't right to talk that way, and you don't mean it anyhow,” her aunt interposed, with an apprehensive glance around the room. Julia had never been an ardent churchwoman; she never had the time. The Sabbath day meant for her no cessation of work, only a difference in the kind. Unconsciously she substituted for religious faith, a stolid acceptance of her lot, on the principle that it might be worse, and with a superstitious dread of its being made worse by some indistinct Authority, if she impudently meddled with it or complained about it. “You go on, Millie; tell some more. You know Net just says things to be contrary sometimes,” she said eagerly.

Nettie was opening her lips in denial and challenge when, looking upon the other, a second thought gave her pause. She wondered at herself for not having noticed before that Aunt Julia was getting older — was getting to be an old woman; maybe it was those last teeth she had lost. But she stooped over more; and she was not a good color, grayish or yellowish-grayish. “To be sure, poor Aunt Jule never was much on complexion,” the girl reflected with a stroke of pity.

Millie had got a second wind by now. “Why, loads of people talk like that, Aunt Julia,” she said with a patient, forbearing, explanatory air. “That's the first objection that occurs to everybody. They're all the time saying just like Net, that things aren't fair.



They don't realize that when they talk that way, they're just proving the Altruistic interpretation of the great Cosmic Design," said Millie, appropriately reverent. Then she continued in a more direct colloquial style. "Now just stop and think: we all have our troubles, whatever we do, don't we? You never heard of anybody that got through life without having some trouble some time, now did you? If we all had everything our own way to suit us, we'd everyone be rich and happy and have our own good health, and — and — er — plenty of money and everything we wanted. The reason we don't isn't because of anything we ourselves have *done*; for instance, we didn't get ourselves born, did we? We can't help being here, can we? No more can we help the Error that's all about us. It's fastened on each and every one of us alike. Call it unfair! Why, the Cosmic Scheme is fairness itself. Because, don't you see, it won't permit of any exceptions. We *all* have to stand the consequences of Error. On the Cosmic Plane, everybody is even. What we take to be inequalities are isolated instances of Negation. If we could see with our bodily eyes the whole mass of humanity all at once, with all its troubles and its blessings, we'd see that it was at an absolute level. But of course that's impossible. Well, our spiritual vision can't be any stronger than our physical vision, naturally. If there's a hill in front of me obstructing my view, I can't see around it," Millie said most reasonably — "and in the same way I can't see around the spiritual obstructions — the Negations. They seem just as real to me as any real hill."

Nettie sat silent, unable to disentangle and formulate a single one of the hundred counter arguments

that crowded into her mind. The difficulty was that one somehow could not come fairly to grips with Millie's statements; the target eluded aim like a will-o'-the-wisp, her words appeared to build an invincible wall — but marching to the assault, one battered at nothing! To Nettie sham thinking was as incomprehensible as any other sort of sham; she naively supposed that there must be an idea behind all this mist of language, and that the fault lay with her own slow-moving utilitarian intelligence. Among the Altruistic congregation were business-men she knew, solid, practical, successful men, who must understand and believe in the new creed since — ultimate test! — they gave their money to its support. She would look smart, wouldn't she, setting herself up to say it was all rigmarole, in the face of Mr. So-and-So and Mr. Such-Another, Nettie thought humbly. And there sat her aunt, the needle for once still and the piece of work dangling down, while she listened with all her senses and with a look fluttering between hope and fear such as Nettie had never before seen on her face.

“Do *you* understand all that, Aunt Julia?” Nettie asked her abruptly.

Julia started, turning vague eyes; then she shook herself together with a slight sigh, falling to on the sewing with renewed energy. “Why no, I don't know as I do *all* of it,” she said apologetically “but it's kind of comforting, don't you think?”

“‘Comforting’?” repeated Nettie. “Oh, I see. You mean that about our all being in the same boat together, kind of? At least that's what I understood Millie to say. Well, there *is* something in that. If Somebody —” said Nettie with some shyness, for she was not given to self-revelation — “if Somebody were

to offer me the chance to be the only happy person in the world, I don't believe I'd take it. I'd feel like saying: 'Why, it's all right the way it is, God. Much obliged, but if You don't mind, I'll just keep along with the rest of 'em.'"

Millie was shocked. "I know you don't mean any harm, but that's an awfully familiar way to talk, Net. And when it comes to understanding, of course we can't understand *everything* about the Altruistic interpretation; we just have to believe without understanding, like we do the Bible itself. You believe everything that's in the Bible, don't you?"

"Why yes, of course. Everybody does."

"Well, you don't understand it. You don't understand the miracles, but you know they're *so*, because the Bible tells you. If people would believe nowadays the same as they did in Bible times, there'd be miracles again. There wouldn't be any more sickness —"

"*Wouldn't* there, Millie?" cried out Julia, abandoning her seam again, in the same half-hopeful, half-frightened suspense.

"Oh, but they *won't*, you know!" said Millie rather hastily and not without alarm. "I mean they won't believe. That's the trouble. Mrs. Evans says if they would only have faith enough, the most miraculous things would be perfectly simple and possible; there wouldn't be any more death or pain or sorrow in the world, because we would have got rid of Error through our faith. But she says in all her experience she never has known anybody to have that strength of belief; even the best never had enough; they never had *half* enough," Millie reiterated with vigorous emphasis. "She always tells everybody if

they're sick to go to a doctor. You may think you have faith enough to cure you, but you haven't. And besides, it isn't just you alone, it's the whole world that's got to *believe!*"

Julia's face fell. "Oh, well —!" she sighed, with her fatalistic obedience. Nettie listened, drawing her brows as she might have over a balance-sheet wherein lurked some obscure mistake. Obviously the day of miracles was indefinitely postponed; a whole world of believers in the Altruistic interpretation was a pretty large order! And in the striking convenience of this arrangement, there was to be felt rather than seen a shadowy resemblance to certain mundane schemes for getting along that would not bear too close investigation. If Nettie had put her thought into words she would have said that then and there for the first time the thing began to sound and look "phony." What she did say, however, was: "Well, Mrs. Evans is one of your Leaders. Hasn't *she* got enough faith?"

"No, she says not. She prays and studies all the time to improve her faith — strengthen it and increase its growth, you know. She'll do that with anybody else, too, of course she'll help you all she can, giving you instruction with prayer and interpretation; but trying to get faith and really getting it are two very different things, she says. It takes a long while; people get discouraged and won't keep on. That shows, she says, the power of Error, and the struggle the world is going to have to set itself free."

## XVIII

**W**HEN the war came on, there was probably no citizen of this republic, with equal intelligence and character, so indifferent to it as that gem of stenographers and office-girls, Nettie Stieffel. Hers was the ideal neutrality. It was not that she lacked the perception of right and justice; on the contrary, that was one of her strongest traits. But Nettie's principles were strictly personal, for her own use in the everyday life of her own world. It was impossible for her to take any interest in a struggle of Right against Wrong conducted by people she did not know, in countries on the other side of the globe. In a discussion of banking methods she would have taken sides vigorously; but to be pro-German or pro-Ally, and to argue and squabble and get red in the face and all but come to blows in the ardor of opposing partisanship seemed to her a waste of time and breath and energy. Let them fight it out in Europe; it was Europe's quarrel. Her adherence would not avail to help either party; and anyhow she was too busy, she had to work, and there was enough on her mind already. Her limited imagination refused a hearing even to the tales of horror and suffering that circulated so copiously, classing them all with the sensational rubbish, divorces, elopements, financial scandals, which they had crowded off the front page.

“They've got to print something,” said Nettie scornfully. “Well, it never did take me long to look

over the paper in the morning, and now I get through quicker than ever — just the market reports and the bank statements if there's any published, and the real-estate-and-building column, and of course the deaths, that's all." She might have added that she was keenly interested and kept herself very well informed in such subjects as foreign exchange rates, the movements of stocks conditioned more or less on the movements of the European armies, and the bank's attitude on the question of German and Allied loans; but Nettie had her own standards — doubtless some of them amusingly out of proportion — about business discretion, business reticence, and moreover she had long ago decided to save herself the trouble of making a choice between things suitable to repeat and things unsuitable by never repeating anything at all.

Europe's quarrel had been going on for fully a year before she discovered that it was likely to become her quarrel, too, in spite of her detachment. The scarcity and soaring price of certain commodities pointed the moral for her more plainly than any sermonizing upon the war's monstrous cost to all humanity in common. Hands across the sea, indeed! Nobody on earth could escape that wide-flung and most horrid grasp. Even then, however, Nettie's main emotion was only one of dismayed surprise at the number and variety of supplies for which directly or indirectly we depended upon those alien, distant peoples, speaking gibberish, frantically tearing one another's eyes out — such was Nettie's conception of them. She grumbled a good deal, finding fault with all of them indiscriminately. "Well, I do wish the everlasting idiots would quit, and let everything settle down again. What d'you suppose the latest is? Why, I can't get a hair-

net — just a plain, ordinary hair-net that used to be two for a quarter — on account of the war. Doesn't that pass everything you ever heard of? The idea of the war knocking the bottom out of hair-nets! Seems they were all made in Austria, or at least the people that made 'em were Austrians and now the men are all fighting, of course, and the women have gone into the munition-factories, so there aren't any more hair-nets. You can't get one for love or money," complained Nettie, to whom this was a very real deprivation; her tidily stylish coiffure missed the aid. "I can't get over it. The war — and hair-nets! You wouldn't think there could possibly be any connection. About the dyes and stockings and everything else that came from Germany, it's easy to understand. This last lot of ink that we've got at the bank is awful stuff, they say the ink-peoples' chemists and their best workmen were all foreigners and of course they've mostly gone back to their own countries, so the ink's being made by somebody that doesn't know how, or else they can't get the right materials any more; it smells fit to knock you down. But hair-nets! If that isn't the limit!"

She made these remarks to Mr. James Marvin, and he agreed that it did seem to be a kind of small-potatoes trick. "But in this war all the small businesses and the little people are getting it in the neck anyhow," he added musingly; "the big ones keep booming right along. Anybody that's in steel or oil or these high explosives or army equipment or staple stuff to eat — Gee!" ejaculated Jim with envy. "Those fellows would like to see the war run along for years — and if it don't it won't be their fault," he finished with a secret, meaning look.

Nettie heard such statements many times a day, and never without the inward recoil of a just, sensible and kindly character; but she preserved her impersonal attitude. No use contradicting them, she opined; they didn't know what they were talking about, but she herself knew precious little more. Why argue? And besides, by to-morrow they would have forgotten what they said and be going around reporting something else, as like as not diametrically opposed! "Looks like easy money. But I guess they have their troubles too, the same as everybody else," was all she said.

Jim let his eyes stray over her from head to foot, pausing quite frankly on the way at the localities which met his most emphatic approval. As always her dress was smart, suitable to herself and the occasion, complete in the last detail. Another woman might not unjustifiably have assumed that with such a face and figure, she could carry off any costume; but not Nettie. She exercised a vigilant taste, never bought carelessly or mistakenly, and yet contrived not to give too much time or money to the task. Marvin, in a man's uncomprehending fashion, felt her appearance to be absolutely satisfactory; it was a credit to him personally. In strong contrast to her former admirer, young McQuair, Jim did not at all mind a battery of stares directed upon his companion by other men; it flattered him. He considered that he himself was "not so worse" when it came to dress and looks; they made a classy couple, by —!

"Yeah, shouldn't wonder!" he said in answer to her last words. "Well, how's it been treating *you* here lately? Things coming your way?" The question was a natural one, for he had not seen her for



some weeks; there had intervened one of those periodic disappearances about which few were so tactless as to inquire, although to those who did James invariably furnished a ready and tripping explanation, not too hard to believe. He had been in New Orleans, El Paso, Havana, following the races; he had been down at French Lick taking the baths for a bothersome little touch of rheumatism; he had been up in the Canadian-Pacific country looking over a wheat-ranch proposition for some parties in New York, etc., etc. This time he returned in funds, it seemed — which was not always the case — and his first act was to take Nettie out to dinner at the highest-priced, most stylish restaurant in town. Mr. Marvin, as he himself not infrequently asserted, was no piker. Now they loitered over the last of the meal in the be-frescoed and be-mirrored café at the Hotel Preston until it should be time for the theatre to open; Jim had tickets to “The Thirteenth Chair.” He went on: “You were working pretty hard when I left. Still at it?”

“Yeah. Have to.”

“What’s the big idea? Why don’t you stick those old tightwads at the bank for a raise? They’d give it to you quick enough, rather than lose you.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t care to do anything like that. I’m making more as it is than they’d want to give me; and I don’t mind work. I like it. It’s only that I can’t seem to keep the money from going out as fast as it comes in. Everything costs so,” said Nettie. She wagged her head, disapproving but helpless. “You’ve got to have a whole lot of money to get along nowadays.”

“‘A whole lot of money,’” Jim repeated after her

and looked at her sidelong over his cigar, with a kind of tentative grin. "Well now, there must be a whole lot of men ready and willing to make it for you; I know one of 'em. Why not give him a chance?"

"Oh, go on, Jim! Don't start *that* all over again!"

"Why, why not, Nettie?" He began to plead. "See here, you talk about liking to work, but you know you aren't having any such grand time. The worst of it is there isn't any come-out to it. You might keep on working forever, and what would you have to show for it in the end? Nothing except that you've taken care of the bunch at home! There's nothing in it for *you*, and you're entitled to *something*, aren't you? You've done it long enough. Let some of them get busy and take some of it off of you, or take care of themselves anyhow." His voice softened. "Say, we'd have lots of fun. And there wouldn't be anything too good for you either; you know I'm no piker. I'm not going in competition with John D. or Andy Library yet," said Jim with humorously exaggerated modesty, "but I'm making good money —"

Nettie asked inwardly: "*Yes, but how are you making it?*" It was thus that she steadied herself against Jim's attacks which moved her more than she would admit. In defiance of her better judgment, something within her obstinately persisted in liking Jim; and there was at least a grain of truth in what he had just been saying about the family and her profitless future. She was twenty-eight years old, and what had she to show for her twenty-eight years, sure enough? Two hundred and fourteen dollars in the savings-bank, and a fine, barely perceptible line between her eyebrows that would be a wrinkle before she knew it. Before she knew it, the best of her life

would be gone, maybe it was gone already; she would be old, and old people don't have any fun, no difference how good they have been, how hard they have tried to do their duty. Nettie had an instant of shuddering panic; it was as if some door into the farther years had dropped ajar, letting in upon her a faint, icy zephyr from the bleak, straightened corridor of age. In another instant, glancing at the reflections and counter-reflections of her own figure in the opposing pier-glasses and inadvertently catching the eye of a commercial-traveling gentleman fixed upon her in admiration, she recovered her normal balance. Pshaw, what was the matter with her? She wasn't quite in Aunt Julia's class yet!

"No, there isn't any use your talking, Jim. I don't want to marry anybody — right now anyhow."

Marvin knew her well enough not to press her, and far too well to plead that she would be the salvation of him, whereas without her he would head straight for the dogs. On the only occasion when he had used that lever in persuasion, Nettie had foiled him with disconcerting laughter, not hesitating, furthermore, to call it "bunk" to his very face. Jim liked her none the less; it was in his rogue's temperament to realize that she was right about the "bunk," and to admire her for a sharpness so unusual in women.

"All right, kid," he said obediently. "I won't say anything more — right now. You know about me anyhow," and beckoned to the waiter for the bill, pulling out a roll of money ostentatiously. "What's that chicken-feed?" he inquired, loftily eyeing the tray of loose silver when the man came back. "Keep it, George, keep it, it's too much trouble to count!" A splendid performance; for some reason it came into

Nettie's head that Randon McQuair never did anything like that; and for some reason she gave a brief sigh.

"How's Millie? And how's Mr. Millie?" Jim asked her facetiously; and Nettie had to smile in spite of herself. There was no blinking the fact that to the minds of most people Mrs. Mildred Aymar Hands was by a long way the most important half of the combination, especially since she had come into prominence as an Altruist. American society functions against a background of husbands, so that there was nothing novel about the spectacle of Elmer; he was no more unobtrusive and uncomplaining than myriads of his fellows. It was only that cynical scapegrace of a Jim that made fun of him; but Jim dared to make fun of Millie, too; he did not even stop at making fun of the Altruistic Brotherhood, and their church and their high priestess, Mrs. Nalia Gruber Evans herself. He was wholly unregenerate; and so potent are the forces of evil that the Altruistics invariably came off second best in an encounter with him. Somehow that sacrilegious wit of his found unerringly the weak joints in their armor. Even Millie would hesitate and stammer and get Negation and Error into an inextricable tangle under Jim's fire. Some expression about his shifty, impenetrable black eyes, his loose-lipped humorous mouth confused and daunted her; perhaps it was a subtle suggestion of comradeship in knavery. He seemed to know her through and through, while she did not and could not know him.

"Why, they're all right, I guess," Nettie told him. "Millie led the meeting or the services or whatever they call it at the church the other day."

"You don't say! Millie's coming right along, isn't

she? But where was Nalia?"— and the very way in which Jim brought out the name mysteriously surrounded it with an atmosphere of farce—"How did she like taking a back seat?"

"I believe she was sick or something, and Millie took her place. They said she did awfully well. I didn't go; I never do. I haven't got any use for 'em. Those old Altruists, I mean."

"Same here. But lots of people have. If you want to make a living in this country, start a new religion. It's a cinch! You can't lose out on it!" said Mr. Marvin with conviction. "Only everybody can't do it. Me, now. I'd be a failure," he added in jocular regret. "Anyhow I'd rather take it from 'em some other way. And besides I like a religion that's run on the good old hell-fire principle. There's more to it somehow. These new ones, they all pass up hell, first thing. No, your Uncle Ezra would be a fizzle; but no reason why Millie shouldn't make good." He was silent a moment, looking off, narrowing those unreliable eyes in a meditative fashion that brought out a good many sinister lines grouped at the corners of them. "But say, what'll she do with Elmer? If she gets to going pretty strong at this Leader business, she can't have Elmer tagging around."

"Goodness, I don't know," said Nettie perturbed. "I never thought about it. Why, Elmer wouldn't make any difference, would he?"

"Mighty little," Jim said with his hard grin. "My guess is she'll let him go. Too bad!"

Mr. Marvin's income, whatever its source, appeared to be a liberal one and earned without conspicuous effort. Except for sudden, unheralded absences on "business" which lasted anywhere from twenty-four

hours to a fortnight or longer, Jim seemed to be prosperously doing nothing. To be sure, doing nothing was his well-established habit, but hitherto it had not been attended by evidences of prosperity — rather the reverse. Now he might be seen any day at his favorite resorts, garbed in the latest styles, drinking freely, hand in glove with numbers of other sporting gentlemen whose means of gaining a livelihood were as obscure as his own, and manifestly not so successful. Once in a while, perhaps, there would be some dashing petticoat in his company; James was no Galahad. Undoubtedly he would have liked his orthodox sweetheart better; but if she would be cold, why, a man's a man for a' that. Moreover, the places and ways in which he could entertain Nettie were annoyingly restricted; they had to be respectable, and they were frequented by respectable people some of whom Mr. Marvin had no desire to meet. For instance, he did not care to put himself in the way of Mr. James Peabody. "We aren't a bit popular with each other," Jim observed sardonically. Nor was he popular with the officials of the Travellers' And Traders', with other officials in certain railroad circles; conservative business-men who had never laid eyes on him before, would somehow conceive a prejudice against him upon the shortest acquaintance. It was mutual; their disapproval did not blight the spirit of this hardy Ishmael; he returned it and avoided coming in contact with them.

Nettie Stieffel, at her age, after ten or twelve years of direct association with men in a world where some conventions and some artificialities fell automatically into disuse, was under no illusions about this lover's standing; maybe she suspected the existence of those

flamboyant ladies, too, but without hard feeling. She regarded them as a masculine bad habit of a piece with other masculine bad habits such as gambling and getting drunk. It was a decent and self-respecting indifference, unflavored by any such soft sentiment as charity; Nettie thought, perhaps rightly, that it was no business of hers how the men behaved, except as regarded their behavior towards herself; and for the women, they were fools and therefore negligible.

This stark character and woefully unimagined intelligence prevented her from divining what a much duller and weaker woman would have known by instinct, namely: that she herself ought not to risk being seen and going about with Marvin. It never came into Nettie's head that a scandalous interpretation might be put upon their comradeship; she was too upright, too self-reliant, too clean-minded. She never thought ill of anybody, why should anybody think ill of her, she would have questioned with supreme simplicity. Rochester Avenue knew her so well, and was so accustomed to pairing her with Jim that in spite of a word or two of gossip here and there, no one dreamed of offering advice or warning. Nettie Stieffel could take care of herself, and she wouldn't thank anybody for help in that direction was the Avenue's unvoiced opinion. Her first intimation of what might be going on in other peoples' minds came from Mr. Emil Marklein, junior, who on a sudden began to renew attentions which had never been welcome, and were now invested with some indescribable quality that made them more unwelcome still. He was at once bolder and slyer, more confident and more insinuating. Nettie was perplexed and

disquieted to find that her previous forthright tactics were of no avail; Emil only laughed at the biting repartee which would have effectually "turned him down" once upon a time. He developed a way of looking at her, repellently suggestive of secret understanding; his knowing smile filled her with an ungentle desire to dash her fist into the middle of it and spoil a tooth or so for him. He would come and hang over her desk, and whisper for ten minutes at a stretch, and no amount of pretending not to hear, of deliberately random replies, or of forbidding silence discouraged him.

"What on earth has started him again?" the young woman wondered in angry bewilderment. "He quit once, why can't he *stay* quit?" Impossible as it seems, she never guessed what it was that had started Emil again, not even when he would bring in Marvin's name as he did sometimes with a significance which she found disagreeable without knowing why. She was actually too irritated to speculate about the meaning of many of his speeches; a great part of the time she did not listen, and afterwards could not remember them; there remained with her only a furious repugnance and a furious purpose to "get even."

On a day, she happened to be alone in the little anteroom through which those clients of the bank who had business with the vice-president had to pass to reach his private office. This anteroom Nettie had come to regard as *her* private office; there she sat, transcribing from her notes, onto the typewriter, and anon when the little instrument on her desk buzzed a signal, she would rise up and repair to old Emil's presence with her pencil and pad, quick yet unhurried, reliable, incomparably efficient. But this time



she was peaceably knitting on a Red Cross sweater, having got through the letters on hand and knowing that she would not be wanted immediately; it was Tuesday and Mr. Marklein had gone to directors' meeting. The younger Emil knew that, too, without doubt; for presently in he walked. Nettie looked up and he gave her that abhorred smile.

"Hello, got it all to ourselves, haven't we? Well, suits *me!*"

Nettie made no reply. He came and lounged down into a chair alongside her own. "Sulky, as usual, I see," said Emil in the vein of elegant banter he had lately adopted. "You look cute when you get that expression on. Is that the reason, or would your friend raise the dickens if he found out you were being nice to me, once in a while?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Nettie, knitting violently.

"No, of course not. Well, never mind, don't let's talk about him anyway; let's talk about *us*. Say, can't you stop that knitting a minute —?"

"Take your hand away!"

"Oh here now, what you afraid of? You aren't afraid of me? Why, you know I —" He finished in a lower voice, and as Nettie started to her feet, renewed his hold, drawing her down to him. "Come now, you know you're just pretending. Or if you're scared of Marvin —? Why, what he don't know won't hurt him — and suppose he found out, you should worry about *him!* I'm better fixed than he is any day. I'll show you a sure-enough good time. Just say what you want — oh, come now, just *once* —?" Again he ended in a whisper.

He felt Nettie's tense muscles suddenly relax, but

not in acquiescence. "Somebody's coming!" she said; and Emil, conscious that there were more chivalric enterprises for a gentleman to be caught in than embracing a young woman who was trying vigorously not to be embraced, hastily got himself to a seemly distance.

When the older Marklein entered there was his son rummaging impotently amongst some papers, and there was his stenographer knitting away with fierce and rapid motions and an unusually pallid face which, however, he did not remark. Indeed, he bestowed very little attention on either one of them; Nettie was for old Emil a piece of valuable office-furniture, and as to Emil junior, Mr. Marklein, to tell the truth, was not intimately acquainted with the young man. What with school, college, trips abroad and so on, the second Emil had spent most of his life away from home. Only of late had Mr. Marklein realized that this son, whom he had looked upon up till then as a boy, was thirty years old, had never done a solid day's work in all the thirty, and gave no slightest promise of bettering that record. Old Emil who had been making his own living since he was a lad of fifteen, who enjoyed nothing so much as work, and had an honest man's contempt for laziness and worthlessness, nevertheless accepted his fate philosophically. He had done his best for Emil — and Emil had turned out no good. It was a misfortune for which he could not be held responsible. Now finding the younger man in the office, apparently bent on trying to do something, he was interested enough by the phenomenon to give him some directions about a letter.

“Miss Nettie can take it. She knows who the people are — she knows all about it,” he said, unconsciously betraying a reliance on Nettie which might have gratified her, at another moment and he passed on into the rear room.

Nettie silently folded up the knitting and addressed herself to taking the dictation, with a stolid eye on her companion. He would not dare to “start anything” again, she told herself, with his father almost within hearing on the other side of the door; he was too yellow! She had not been afraid of him, even when alone and unsupported; all that troubled her was the recollection of how near she had come to using her knitting-needles — within an ace! She did not know what, in the ultimate moment, had stayed her; it must have been some sub-conscious recoil. Reviewed in composure and safety, loathing invaded her; it would have been a horrid expedient, revolting and stupid, the kind of thing that dago women resorted to, Nettie thought in final condemnation. That was not the way to handle him; that was not the way to settle him; she could think of something better than *that*. Emil resumed his chair, eyeing her uncertainly.

“Ready, Mr. Marklein?” said Nettie smoothly, with her pencil poised. Her hand was steady — much steadier than his! He got through the letter, not without some sentimental interpolations, though obliged to hold himself in check, as Nettie had foreseen; and towards the end some of the other clerks coming in unknowingly released her. Still in a composed, purposeful fury she got it ready for the mail, and filed a duplicate; and later on started home at

her wonted hour, but in rather unwonted high spirits. She hummed a little tune as she pinned on her hat in front of the toilet-room mirror.

“Hello, feeling kind of good, aren’t you?” queried an office-mate in some surprise.

“Oh, I was just thinking of something,” said Nettie gaily.

For the next three or four days she managed to elude Emil junior by various petty feminine tricks which in themselves she thoroughly despised. But the end justified every device, and the end, as Nettie was aware, would not be long in coming. “I suppose I’m cutting off my nose to spite my face,” she once or twice reflected grimly, and told herself that she did not care. She had to do something; she couldn’t have *that* happen again! She knew that she had acted on impulse, but even thinking it over in cold blood, no measure more likely to be effective occurred to her.

The end coincided with the arrival of the manager of the Eagleville Glass Company, long-time customers of the bank, from his up-state town, in an inquiring and somewhat irritated mood. Mr. Marklein was busy at the moment with Mr. Halpin of the Credit-and-Loan department, notwithstanding which the gentleman from Eagleville insisted on seeing him at once. “I came down on other business, but while I’m here I thought I might as well call in and have a matter explained,” he said severely. “Your credit-and-loan man will be just as much interested as Mr. Marklein. I haven’t much time, Miss — er — if you’ll kindly tell him —?”

Nettie was not at all surprised; for all its menace of disaster to herself, she took a kind of frosty pleas-

ure in the situation. After due negotiations she ushered Mr. Jaycox into the vice-presidential room; young Emil happened to be there, too — a stroke of luck, Nettie thought, savagely jubilant. But, closing the door, as she heard the tone in which the glass-company's manager began: "Mr. Marklein, I don't want to make a fuss about a trifle — no doubt there's been some mistake made — or if it's a joke perhaps you'll allow me to say that I don't see the point —" Nettie had a flash of compunction.

"Oh my, I hope he isn't so mad he'll want to take his account away!" she ejaculated inwardly. Indeed, she was loyalty itself, and had had no design of making trouble for anybody except one young man who amply deserved it; the fact that she herself in all likelihood, must suffer incidentally was dwarfed to unimportance by the thorough satisfaction of her revenge.

A sustained rumbling on the other side of the partition could presently be identified as the voice of Mr. Jaycox reading aloud; there was an outburst of interrogation or expostulation from the other gentlemen all together; then a silence; then a species of dropping fire of remarks from everybody all around the room; then the announcer on Nettie's desk set up its strident call.

She went in and stood before them tall and steady and quietly expectant, as usual. Emil was sitting flushed, sullen and sheepish, in an ostentatiously negligent posture, with his hands in his pockets and his legs crossed, swinging one foot and kicking at the table-leg. Mr. Halpin looked as if he were doing his best not to laugh; a puzzled appreciation of something humorous in the scene was beginning to show on the

managerial countenance of Mr. Jaycox, erstwhile so lowering; only old Emil, harsh, heavy and serious, with every faculty concentrated on the matter in hand to the absolute exclusion of aught else, remained like Nettie herself, perfectly natural. He held out a piece of typewritten paper to her.

"Miss Stieffel, I wish you'd look this over and tell me if you know anything about it."

Nettie took the sheet which bore the bank's letter-head and the date she expected to see, and read aloud:

*"Albert I. Jaycox, Esq.*

*Dear Sir:*

*Yours of 7th. received. In reply would state you have the prettiest hair I ever saw —"*

"Why yes, Mr. Marklein. I wrote this."

Halpin coughed; Mr. Jaycox, as it happened, was quite bald. He gave a sort of unwilling smile; and both of them glanced, perhaps without meaning to, at the heavy folds of Nettie's rust-colored hair; and from her to the younger Emil with his angry, foolish face; and at each other. There was a second of silence.

"Mr. Emil Marklein dictated it," said Nettie deliberately and distinctly. "I took down everything he said. The copy's in the file —"

"That's all. You can go," said old Emil.

## XIX

**A**FTERWARDS it was reported amongst the clerical small-fry at the bank that Mr. Marklein senior said it seemed to him he was getting a rather raw deal inasmuch as he couldn't discharge his son for being a damn fool, and he had to discharge the young woman for not being one! But the probabilities are that old Emil never said anything of the kind; he was neither so expansive, nor so epigrammatically gifted. Nettie, having successfully accomplished the feat of cutting off her nose to spite her face, went home still stubbornly maintaining to herself that she did not care. She could get another job, she had money saved up and could afford to wait, to take her choice and get something good. The folks might make all the outcry they pleased; indeed she herself was sorry; but let them say what they would have done in her place! Even supposing there had been a man in the family to whom she might have gone, he could have done nothing to young Marklein on account of the publicity; if anything got into the papers — ! But there was nobody, she had to look out for herself. "Pop'll say I did right, anyhow," she thought with a singular feeling of comfort — singular, that is, in view of the fact that it had been years since she or any other member of the household, even the youngest, had relied on Frank for moral support, gone to him for advice, trusted his judgment or asked his opinion. The invalid was islanded among the various currents of their lives, like a stone in mid-stream;

their very kindnesses isolated him. But now Nettie fell back confidently on his understanding, not aware of inconsistency. Anyhow, she thought with finality, what was done, was done; no use worrying over it. None the less, it was a hateful piece of news to carry home — hateful and humiliating. They would have it all over the neighborhood in no time that Nettie Stieffel had been fired; she would never have believed that day would come! There would always be some to doubt the explanation, too. The people were good, they were her friends; come to the pinch, they would stand up for her, defend her tooth and nail; but in the meanwhile — “Everybody does love to talk!” Nettie thought pessimistically; “and there’re lots of ’em that think it shows how sharp they are not to believe anything.”

A doctor’s little runabout with the green cross on the front of the radiator-hood was backing and turning before the house, and dashed off at a brisk gait just as she reached it. Mrs. Weaver was out on her porch and Nettie’s mother came flying down the steps with a face full of eagerness and importance and animation.

“*Nettie!* How’d you happen to get home just at this minute? Ain’t you early? Have you *heard?* You *can’t* have heard?”

“No, I’m not early — it’s nearly six. Heard what? I haven’t heard anything —” Nettie was answering, startled, when Mrs. Stieffel stopped her with an energetic gesture.

“*Ssh!* If she sh’d hear us, she’d suspicion something right off. *Ssh!* They get so suspicious you know —”

Mrs. Weaver ran across, visibly agog with curiosity



and sympathetic excitement. "What'd he say?" she asked. "He didn't say it was hopeless, did he?"

"No, not in so many words — but you know how doctors are. They seldom ever tell you the real truth. They don't want to depress you," said Mrs. Stieffel — who, however, was not markedly depressed. "Oh my, Mis' Weaver, it's awful!" she said with emotional relish — "just awful!"

"What's the matter? Is it Pop?" said Nettie.

"Ssh!"

Nettie's nerves, sorely tried lately, gave way for one instant. "For Heaven's sake, what's happened?" she demanded roughly, and grasped her mother's arm and shook it. "Don't stand there 'ssh-ing' me. What's *happened*? Who's sick? Who's dead? Or are they only hurt? What's *happened*? Can't you answer?"

"Why, Net, you act like you're all wrought up," said Maggie soothingly yet with reproof, glancing at Mrs. Weaver in apology. "I *thought* you must have had a *feeling*, one of those premonitions-like, that something was wrong at home when I saw you coming. You look so kind of *down* —"

Nettie made a movement to push past her into the house, but her mother held her back. "Ssh! Don't go in so sudden —"

Nettie commanded herself with a strong effort. "Anybody might die while you're talking. I haven't had any premonitions, I didn't know anything was the matter, I wasn't dreaming of it. I just came home like I always do. *Now* will you tell me, or let me go and find out for myself?" she said as gently as she was able; yet Maggie shrank a little.

"Well, it seemed funny for you to come back just

when you did. If you'd got here only one minute sooner, you'd have run right into the doctor —"

"It's your Aunt Julia, Nettie. She was took sick sudden," said Mrs. Weaver bluntly, overcoming a polite reluctance to interfere. "Your ma's just trying to break it to you easy. I know it ain't my place to stick in and tell you, only —"

"Aunt Julia? How sick? What way sick?"

"*Ssh!*"

"What'd the doctor say was the matter, Mis' Stieffel?"

Helen ran out. "Say, she's been asking me if Doctor White said anything to you separate any different from what he told her!" she announced importantly. "I didn't know what to say. Hello, Net, you back?"

All that Nettie could gather was that her aunt had complained of pain once or twice during the morning, and then after dinner collapsed suddenly as she was helping with the dishes, and had to be put to bed. They had not thought of having the doctor immediately; she kept saying she would feel better pretty soon. But at last they got frightened and Helen went up to the drug-store and telephoned. He did not get there for quite a while; he said something about a consultation — "He says to me, 'Mis' Stieffel,' he says, 'Your sister's a very sick woman,' he says —"

Nettie left them talking. A glance into the kitchen revealed the dishes still unwashed. Her father was dozing in his chair. There was a simmer of flies; the lower panel of the screen-door had scuffed out long ago, the raw rusted edges of the wire cloth curling back, catching and tearing everybody's skirts; Nettie

could not count the times she had told them to have it mended. She remembered it anew with an impatience which she checked in a shock of remorseful apprehension. This was no moment to be finding fault about screen-doors. She went on upstairs to the sick-room.

Julia had been sewing, of course, and the floor was littered with her scraps; in the midst of them the machine stood open and idle, the needle arrested in the seam as if by a spell. The unnatural spectacle was eloquent of disaster. There were clothes scattered everywhere, Julia's frowzy skirts, her poor, broken old corsets. It was gloomy and close in the little room where among other attentions which were no doubt as futile, Mrs. Stieffel had painstakingly pulled down all the curtains except that at the west window through which a ray of sunlight slanted mercilessly into the sick woman's face. She lay high on the untidy pillows with her eyes closed, but as Nettie saw with an inward bound of relief, breathing easily as if she were in no present suffering, at any rate; there was no dreadful change upon her features. She opened her eyes, and spoke a little shrilly and feebly, but in her natural manner.

"Is that you, Net?"

"Sure it's me!" said Nettie, adopting that style of false gaiety with which we are all painfully familiar. "What you mean by scaring all of us this way?"

"Well, I just seem to kind of play out all at once," said Julia with a certain surprise. "Generally, you know, I'm pretty good at standing pain. I've never been the kind to bawl and whoop and go running to the doctor for every little thing. But this was one too many for me. What'd that doctor say?"

"I don't know. I didn't get here in time to see him," said Nettie, privately giving thanks. "Is it hurting you now, Aunt Jule?"

"No. Not so bad as it was, that is. I can stand a pretty good stiff pain, you know," Julia reiterated. "This just got the better of me for a minute. I've had it before, and it always passed off after a while — but not this time." She paused a moment, then added: "I guess I'll be all right in the morning."

Nettie, to her horror, felt her chin quivering uncontrollably, the tears smarting in her eyes. To avoid detection, she busied herself desperately straightening up the place, finding some outlet for her emotion in gruff and acid comment. "It's a wonder somebody couldn't have put a few of these things away and picked up around here so's it would be a little more decent for you to look at. I *do* think to be sick and have everything all higgle-piggledy —! Is that light in your eyes now? How's that? I don't see why they had to fix the curtain *that way* —"

"Never mind. They didn't think about it. It don't make any difference," said her aunt.

Mrs. Stieffel tiptoed upstairs, coughed significantly on the landing, and as these signals went unnoticed by her daughter, at last resorted to a pregnant whisper. "Nettie! *Ssh!* Say, *Nettie!*" She beckoned and maneuvered elaborately.

Nettie saw her with a gust of impatience that drove back her tears. "Oh, come on in, Ma! What you hanging round out there for?" she challenged not too gently. But she went to the door as the other continued to nod and mouth inarticulately. "What is it now? I'm just trying to clean up some of the muss —"

“*Ssh!*” Her mother seized her and drew her outside. “You oughtn’t to get her excited, you don’t re’lize how sick she is. There oughtn’t to be anything going on in the room, and no running in and out, nor noise nor nothing. The doctor said not!” she whispered violently. “Say, he left a p’scription, but Helen don’t know what she done with it. She says she remembers laying it down somewheres, and she can’t remember where it was, only she says it was in the room, she’s positive. Say, you look if you can find it, will you — *Ssh!* Don’t let on it’s lost to your Aunt Julia —!”

“She put it down on the chair, just before she run out. Ain’t it there, Nettie?” said Julia in her weak voice. “What’d the doctor tell you, Maggie?”

Mrs. Stieffel, taken aback, babbled confusedly. “Nothing — he didn’t say — he said —” Nettie, in a dumb fury, sought the prescription and presently found it among some rags on the chair which they were using in lieu of a table; a tumbler of water had been overturned on the seat by someone’s unguarded movement; Mrs. Stiegel gave an exclamation of dismay at the sight.

“Oh my goodness, it’s all run and washed out! Well, if that ain’t —! What’ll we *do*? Can you tell what’s on it, Net? I ain’t got my glasses, and I never could make out a p’scription anyhow — Well, there’s one thing, he said it wasn’t anything but something to keep the pain down so’s she could sleep. He said there wasn’t anything really he could give her that would do any good — *Oh!*” She clapped her hand to her mouth, stricken with a sudden realization of confidence betrayed. Fortunately at that moment Helen came running up the steps, and her mother attacked

her by way of creating a diversion. "Just look what you done! I sh'd think you'd have more feeling, with your own aunt that's always been just as good as gold to you lying there sick like she is —"

"Good-night, Ma, I haven't done anything to her! You got the prescription? Here, lemme —!" cried out Helen sharply, and twitched the paper from her hand. "It's not wet, just one little corner. You can see it just calls for some kind of tablets. They'll know what they are at Roudebush's." She clattered down again. "Hoo-hoo! Wait, Min! I'll go up to the corner with you!" They heard her hailing a comrade at the top of her healthy young lungs.

Mrs. Stieffel's official cares returned. "There now, Just listen at that racket! And Helen *heard* Doctor White say 'specially Aunt Julia hadn't ought to be disturbed. Some people are just naturally inconsiderate. How you feeling, Julia? Did Helen disturb you?"

"Helen's all right, don't scold her, Maggie. I like to hear the young thing; it sounds kinda well and happy," said Julia.

Nettie looked at her mother helplessly. "I'll tell you what you do, Ma, you go and get some clean pillow-slips, and I'll get out one of my nightgowns and then I'll get some hot water and wash her hands and face and comb her hair out and braid it, and we'll fix her up all nice and comfortable," she suggested. "Let's! Come on!"

"*Ssh!* You do bustle around so, Nettie, and the doctor said she'd ought not to be disturbed —"

"It's all right, Maggie," Julia interposed, turning her head with a cautious effort, distressing to witness. "Only don't let Net tire herself out waiting on

me. She's had a good day's work at the bank already. It ain't any easy job she's got."

Alas, the bank! And alas, her job! In the stress of unforeseen calamity, Nettie had forgotten the bank, and the job which would be hers only until her month was up. For once in her life, courage failed her; she would not tell them now, at any rate.

Mrs. Weaver came over and offered to sit up part of the night. "And he says if he can be of any assistance, just let him know," she said, meaning Mr. Weaver. "He feels a kinda delicacy about coming round himself, even to inquire. People might *think* something, and you know it ain't *that* at all. That's all I got against the business; it's a mean business that way. But he says he's awful sorry, and to give Miss Julia his best regards and tell her we're all looking to see her around again in no time, as spry as a kitten. Everybody's got to be sick once in a while, ain't it so?"

Nettie thanked her, but asserted herself to be perfectly capable of taking charge of the sick woman. In fact, she was, though without any feminine turn for nursing; she disliked the personal care of someone else as much as she would have disliked another's personal care of herself. She was not perhaps very humane; but common sense and a real and strong affection achieved humanity. The physical attentions she accomplished as well as any trained nurse; Nettie did not need to be taught cleanliness, thoroughness, vigilance; it was the ingenious, kindly hypocrisies of the sick-room that taxed her most.

However, that was not for long. Poor Julia was not all right in the morning; she was so far from all right that Nettie, after doing what she could and

leaving injunctions about the care and comfort of the sick woman in a dreary certainty that not one of them would be followed or even remembered, telephoned the doctor as she went down town. What he said was not encouraging; she worked all day oppressed by it. And in the evening, coming home, Mrs. Stieffel met her with a countenance of important gravity.

“She’ll have to have an operation,” she announced with a species of solemn relish. “They’re all coming over after supper.”

“They? Who?”

“Why, Millie and Elmer and Reverend Stegemiller and everybody —”

“For Heaven’s sake, what do they want to come for?”

“Why, *Nettie!* They want to see her before, and say good-bye. Something might happen, you know.”

“They don’t need to act as if it was a wake,” snapped Nettie, miserably. “You don’t want *her* to get to thinking that something may happen. Everybody coming this way, all of a sudden — Millie hasn’t been here for weeks. It’ll look like — like —”

“Oh, she’s p’pared. Doctor White, he p’pared her”

“Nobody’s ever *prepared* for a thing like that,” said Nettie, again in an impotent rage. “But what’s the use —?” What was the use, sure enough? She felt as if she were dashing herself against a stone wall.

She found her aunt a shade grayer, a shade weaker than the day before perhaps; and perhaps the room, owing to her own energetic ministrations, was a shade less disordered. “You heard, Net? They told you?”



"Yes. Goodness, everybody's got to be operated on for something or other nowadays! You're right in style, Aunt Ju!" Nettie assured her gallantly.

"I gotta go to the hospital, did you know?"

"Well, I thought likely you would. It sounds sort of terrible, but really and truly you'll be a whole lot more comfortable and looked after better than you are here. How long did he say it would be?"

"Three weeks, I b'lieve — if — if I come out all right, you know, Nettie."

"Oh, you're going to come out all right, Aunt Julia. Don't you let 'em scare you — not that old Doctor White nor anybody. Why, look how strong you are! You've got a grand constitution. It isn't as if you were some poor, broken-down thing that'd been sickly all her life."

Julia was silent, moving her fingers nervously on the counterpane. "He says I've had it a good while," she said at length. "He says it ought to have been taken out long ago, when it first began to give me trouble. But I didn't know what was the matter — just that something hurt. I — I thought it would get well of itself — or — or —" She broke off, turning tragic eyes to the other. "Nettie, it'll cost five hundred dollars. That's the cheapest they'll do it for."

"Yeah, I know those things cost," Nettie said with resolute cheerfulness. "But it's better spent that way than any other. You don't have to scrape and save so hard, Aunt Julia, anyhow; we'll always take care of you. And we'd rather have you well, and you'd rather *be* well than have all the money on earth."

Julia's face contracted; appalled, Nettie saw her

slow, hard-coming tears welling up, running over.

“Don’t, Aunt Ju, don’t, you’re going to be all right. You’re going to get well —”

“It ain’t that, Nettie — I ain’t thinking of that. It’s — oh, Nettie, I ain’t got all that money. I did have it, but I — I — it’s gone, a lot of it —”

Nettie experienced a definite shock; she knew within a few dollars the extent of her aunt’s exchequer a few months earlier; it was inconceivable that Julia could have gotten through it, undiscovered; the first thought that visited the younger woman was that the other’s mind had broken down under this misfortune. “Oh, shoo! You’ve just added up wrong, Aunt Julia,” she suggested in a tranquilizing tone. “You know you aren’t the best ever at figures. Let me get your savings-bank book and find where the mistake is.”

“There ain’t any mistake, Nettie. I — I spent it — all but the last hundred —” sobbed poor old Julia. “I spent it doctoring —”

“*Doctoring?* But you said —?”

“I know. Well, it wasn’t exactly doctoring either — but it was for this same trouble. I spent it with that Mrs. Evans —” and seeing the blankness of Nettie’s face, she explained: “Mrs. Nalia Gruber Evans, that Altruistic Leader, you know.”

There was a silence while Nettie vainly strove to assimilate this information. “Why, you *couldn’t!* She isn’t a doctor,” she got out at last.

“No, I know. She don’t claim to be. But I thought maybe that prayer and instruction she gives — I thought maybe if I had faith and forgot Error the way she said you’d ought — I thought maybe I’d get well — what’d you say?”

Nettie had made a movement and a sound; she controlled both, choking back wrathful and indignant words. "Nothing, I didn't say anything. I suppose she charged you. That's where your money went?" she asked, trying not to be harsh.

"Yes. I bought her book too. That book the Altruists have, you know —"

"I thought they didn't have anything but the Bible."

"Yes, they got that, too. But there's a book besides. It was eight dollars. She said I'd oughta have it to study out of and stren'then my faith. I tried hard. But it didn't get any better — and then my money got down — and then this come on — and I ain't got but that hundred left!" The tears rolled down. "I guess you think I'm an awful fool, Nettie."

"Don't *you*, for one minute, Aunt Julia," said Nettie, rallying her forces, patting the other's hand. "I think you're *all right!* Suppose you *have* only got a hundred, *I* have some. I got *plenty*. Now, you quit! Don't you dare to worry another minute!"

"But I don't want to take your money — I —"

"You quit now!" She was gratified to see her aunt calming down; possibly Julia's weakened condition accounted in part for the readiness of her acquiescence.

"You're mighty good, Nettie," she said humbly. And with a pathetic glimmer of her ancient spirit: "I won't do anything as tom-fool as *that* again, you see!"

Alone, Nettie sat down and surveyed her estate of joblessness, and imminent moneylessness with a pang of terror for the future. She would have to tell the family now; all together they must raise the money

to get Aunt Julia through the operation. Nettie herself had not enough laid by, and presently she might not be making any. All at once she was not so cocksure and confident about picking out the best position; she began to feel that she would take anything, no matter what. She must start in at once, put an advertisement in the papers, look around, ask all her friends to look around. She had had an idea that when it was bruited about that Nettie Stieffel was — ahem! — was contemplating a change, the inquiries and offers would pour in. Now that radiant prospect was beclouded, blotted out with doubts. It was not made so easy as all that for anyone; you got nothing without going after it — and even then you sometimes got precious little, as Jim said with his foxy humor. She comforted herself as best she might with the knowledge that there was always some demand for good stenographers, that she was as good as any in the city, and that a number of businessmen knew it.

“And he says to me, he says: ‘Mis’ Stieffel, we got a very sick woman on our hands,’ he says —” she heard her mother reciting for the twentieth time the last days, as she went downstairs after carrying up Julia’s meager tray. The neighbors were dropping in and leaving by turns; the Reverend Stegemiller was there ready to pray, Mrs. Stegemiller had come with him ready to sing hymns; Elmer and Millie had arrived — the latter an unexpected reinforcement in preserving sick-room proprieties. Millie did not in the least want to see her Aunt Julia; she had always been in the habit of saving herself from disagreeable spectacles such as sickness and suffering, and moreover she was afraid that “it” might be catching.

Her gently insinuated hints about the doctor's orders, about Miss Stieffel's precarious condition, about the inadvisability of her receiving visitors, about the Health-Board's requirements were much more effective than Nettie's downright interference. None of the company assailed poor Julia after all, not even the clergyman.

"You know we Altruists believe hopefully always," Millie told the latter. "We look always upward. We try to shake ourselves free of clogging actualities. In health we never allow ourselves to think about health; in sickness, we never allow ourselves to think about sickness. We don't admit the Negation called Death. Aunt Julia was studying Altruism; she was going to join us; and I'm sure she would rather —"

"Oh, I didn't know," said the Reverend, hastily, turning rather red; "I looked upon Miss Stieffel as a member of my congregation. But if she was — *is*, I mean — an — er — an Altruist, of course she would prefer — er — a — her own minister. In the Father's house are many mansions — er —"

"Aunt Julia hasn't ever been much of anything in a church way. She's just a good woman," said Nettie, shortly. "But if you go to having any prayers or services around here, Altruist or any other kind, you might as well start hammering nails in her coffin. It isn't good for people sick the way she is."

"Nettie hasn't ever been very spiritual," Millie explained, kindly, with the effect of smoothing over and hushing up an indecorum. But nevertheless Mr. Stegemiller who, it is likely, had innocently considered his extempore prayer and Mrs. Stegemiller's rendition of "Rock of Ages" the pith of the evening, departed not long after; and the rest of the Avenue,

cheated out of emotional recreation, dribbled off, too. When they were all gone Nettie arraigned Mrs. Elmer sharply.

“How did you know about Aunt Julia? Did you know she was taking lessons from that old Mrs. Evans, trying to get well? Paying her for 'em?”

“Yes,” said Millie, placidly.

“Millie Aymar, how could you let her do that?”

“Why, Nettie, she *wanted* to, and how could I stop her? Mrs. Evans never said it would cure her; I *know* she didn't. I never said so either. Aunt Julia just got the notion in her head somehow.”

“Yes, she got it in listening to your humbug talk, and you and Mrs. Evans let it stay in!” cried out Nettie, shaking with anger. “You knew perfectly well what Aunt Julia thought, and you let that fat fake take her money, and all the time she was getting worse and worse —”

“Oh, here, now, Nettie —!” expostulated Elmer. He looked at his wife uneasily; Elmer was a little afraid of his Millie, by this time.

“You oughtn't to talk like that, Nettie,” said Millie with fine patience. “We Altruists don't believe the same as you do, but we don't call names, and think evil of everybody but ourselves. Of course we aren't any of us perfect, and we often succumb to Error —”

“Oh, cut that stuff out! It's all part of the skin game and you know it —”

“Oh, look here now, girls, don't —”

“If Aunt Julia chose to spend her money that way, she had a right to,” said Millie, unruffled. “Of course you were her pet, and she would have left everything to you. But it wouldn't have been much

— not enough to be worth all the fuss you're making. I can't understand you, Net. I wouldn't have believed you thought so much about money."

"Now, Millie!" pleaded Elmer, helplessly.

Nettie had no answer. What was there for her to say? In truth, only one thing more, which, after a silence, she told them. It produced another silence of much heavier concern on everybody's part, even Millie's. If Nettie did not immediately get another position, somebody would have to take care of her — somebody would have to take care of the other Stieffels of whom Nettie had been more or less taking care.

"I'm awfully sorry, Net," Millie said, sincerely enough. "We'd like to help, but the way things are nowadays, it's as much as anybody can do to get along and pay their own expenses. It's a pity this had to happen just now. But you'll get something right off. Don't you know of something for her, Elmer?"

"Why no, not just now, but —"

"I don't want your help," said Nettie sullenly. "I can get something for myself. I've extra work I do, anyhow, outside the bank hours. I'm thinking about Aunt Julia. We've got to arrange for her somehow. We've *got* to!"

"Sure!" said Elmer heartily. A look from his wife quelled him.

"It does seem as if Nettie could have put up with Emil Marklein —"

"Millie, I told you what he said to me! At least, I didn't tell it all right out, because I — I *can't* — I can't say what he did. Men kill another man for things like that — or horsewhip 'em anyhow!"

“That’s so. But you ought to have come to *me*, Nettie. *I’d* have let him know where he got off!” said Elmer, with formidable significance.

“I was going to say, if Net wouldn’t catch a person up so, that if she would just have put up with him until she made sure of another job, it would have been a good deal better for everybody all around,” said Millie. “There wouldn’t have been any harm in that, only common-sense. You could have told old Mr. Marklein, for that matter. There were ever so many things you could have done.” She spoke testily, for it was the real Millie speaking. Negation and Error had both gone to the wall!

Elmer winced; to hear this time-serving doctrine from any woman would have somehow shamed him, and he was hearing it from Millie. “If she’d gone to the old man and told on Emil, he’d have had to fire her anyhow. He can’t listen to any stories like that. It’s the looks of the thing. He has to — what’s this they say now — to ‘save his face.’ That’s it. He’d have had to fire Nettie anyhow to ‘save his face.’ So it’s as broad as it’s long,” he said, heavily. “You did just right, Nettie — only it might have made a difference if you’d come to me. *I’d* have fixed him — the scoundrel!” said Elmer, looking quite valiant and terrible.

“Oh, Elmer, you *wouldn’t* —!” Mrs. Stieffel sighed affrightedly; she herself rather inclined to Millie’s views on the way to handle the situation.

“Well, I’m as sorry as can be. *I’d* do anything on earth to help Aunt Julia, if we just *could!*” Millie repeated. “But it wouldn’t do any good for us to go in debt and get to be dependent ourselves. That would just be sort of shoving the trouble around from



one person to another. If it wasn't for that, I'd give every last cent I've got. But you see how it is! We can't do anything!"

Nettie saw distinctly how it was; she told herself dully that she had known how it would be all along. But after the Hands couple had said good-night and left the house, Elmer came running back ostensibly for a forgotten umbrella but in reality to draw Nettie aside into a corner. "Say, I guess I can scare up a little for you, Nettie. To help pay for your aunt, I mean. She's always worked faithful, and been as kind as could be to us, and — and — and it's a darn shame — and I want to help," the honest fellow declared with a not unmanly emotion. "Millie wants to, too. She was just talking, you know," he added loyally. It was not true, and Nettie knew it, but her heart warmed to Elmer. She thanked him with tears in her eyes.

**J**AMES PEABODY, Esquire, of the Peabody Tool Works, was at this date in the neighborhood of forty-seven years old, and looked older, despite the fact that he had kept his waist-measure and most of his hair; but then he had never looked young. Of late he was popularly supposed to have arrived at the goal of all good Americans, financial ease, indeed at much more than ease with the outbreak of the European War and the demand for all sorts of machinery rising mountainously. A good while previous to that abnormal development, however, he must have been well started towards success; he had put upwards of two decades of grinding hard work behind him, since the death of his father left the whole burden of the business with its debts and difficulties on his shoulders.

Peabody senior was the man with the vision, according to people who had known him; they said that James the son would never have had the initiative to found such a concern as the Tool Works, for all the energy and ability he displayed in carrying it on. Times were different back in the seventies when his father began; the older Peabody had an up-hill struggle for ten or fifteen years. It wore him out; he died with the dream unfulfilled, but the second James, after who knows how many vicissitudes, laborious days, worried nights, made it come true.

He was unmarried, never having taken a recess from his machine tool making long enough to fall in

love, or never having seen a woman that caught his fancy, or it may be never having allowed himself to look at a woman at all. Here he was, a prosperous middle-aged bachelor with a handsome suite of rooms at the club, all the motor-cars he pleased, which is to say one, and that of a plain and medium-priced type, and a set of friends mostly older than himself whose ideas of recreation corresponded with his own; that is, they liked to get together at the luncheon-hour and talk business. It is doubtful if Mr. Peabody had ever set foot in a single one of their houses, although he had no bad habits, and was entirely presentable. To be sure he had met most of the ladies appertaining to them, but the acquaintance somehow never got any farther than an introduction. "Sallie, this is Mr. Peabody you've heard me talk about. Jim, my wife." And there it ended. James, who was observant and had a retentive memory, never failed to recognize them afterwards, raising his hat sedately as they passed; but there it ended. He may or may not have noticed their reciprocal smiles. You might have thought him lonesome in his homeless and solitary estate, but as a matter of fact, he was too used to his life and too busy to think about it.

Observe him, then, clean-shaven — the fashion of clean shaving was inaugurated just as James came of age, and he stuck to it — neatly dressed, with his iron-gray hair and his multiplying crows'-feet, going down to the office one morning and going through the pile of mail on his desk, and sending for his stenographer. And observe the latter coming in, a competent-looking young woman with a mouth as firm as his own. Mr. Peabody glanced at her; glanced again.

"You're the new one?" he said, without interest

much less curiosity, but also without discourtesy; it was a mere form.

“Yes, sir. Mr. Fick hired me.”

Mr. Peabody made a sound of assent, coupled with a slight gesture towards the opposite side of his vast, flat-topped desk and whatever chair might be in that vicinity. “Uh. Take dictation, please.”

She sat down and took it.

This was all that passed at the first sitting, and for numberless sittings thereafter. Very little conversation unrelated to business matters went on anywhere in the Peabody offices; everybody staved along at his appointed task with all steam up, just as everybody was staving along in the Works themselves that covered forty acres of ground up the C. & R. railroad at Kirk’s Station. Day shift, night shift, the twelve hundred workmen swarmed to and fro, the siren belled periodically, the furnaces blazed as if in competition with those of gehenna. If James the first could only have glimpsed it, how happy it would have made him!

Under these conditions, it must have been all of ten days later, just at the finish as the new one was gathering together her papers, that Mr. Peabody said: “Oh — ah — Miss —? What is your name?”

“Nettie Stieffel.”

“Your work is very good.”

“I’m experienced,” said Nettie. It did not occur to her to thank him. What he had said was no compliment from Nettie’s standpoint; it was a statement of fact. Mr. Peabody himself so regarded it, for that matter.

“Yes. I see you are. Where were you before this?” he said.

“With Mr. Marklein at the Travelers’ And Traders.’ ”

“Uh,” said James with his slight grunt, which was never disagreeable, and this time held a note of satisfaction. “I knew I had seen that girl somewhere,” he was saying to himself as Nettie went out of the room; it pleased him as a vindication of the reliability of that memory on which he set a pretty high value.

As for Nettie, she liked this position; all she craved was work, and here there was enough and to spare. She had passed through a period of unwilling leisure, punctuated, so to speak, with odd jobs here and there. Actually brief — not more than three or four weeks — it seemed to her to have lasted a life-time! There were days of desperate search trudging from one office to another, days of waiting, sickening disappointments; she used to look in the glass and marvel that her hair had not gone white — that hair of Emil’s disastrous admiration. All the while, she had to torture her unskilled invention for subterfuges wherewith to deceive Julia at the Good Samaritan, recovering slowly in happy ignorance of Nettie’s plight. And once she had to “stand off” the grocer — yes, she, Nettie Stieffel, who had never owed a dollar since earning her own first dollar — she had to go to Mr. Harmeyer and ask him to wait. It was a bitter pill; all her life she would remember that humiliating moment; although Mr. Harmeyer, who himself must undoubtedly have had to ask for an extension of credit more than once in his career, granted the favor without unkind emphasis. He had some inkling of the state of the Stieffel affairs, in common with the rest of Rochester Avenue; but that was small comfort to Nettie’s proudly independent spirit; it rankled, it

goaded. The public's demonstrations of sympathy, its facile sentiment, its innocent, artless curiosity drove her into a fury; there was a time when she got to slipping in and out of the house by stealth, dodging around corners, feigning not to see people, practicing a dozen other sneaking expedients that she loathed, to avoid the eternal questions and explanations and condolences. It was a nightmare.

It was a nightmare, but it was over. Now she was back in her natural *milieu* — something which she never would have called it, by the way! — happy enough to have gone singing all day long if singing during office-hours had not been a scandalous impropriety. When Fick engaged her upon her answering his advertisement, Nettie could have fallen upon his neck with embraces; it did not matter that she was the only applicant and that in the extremity, he would have taken almost anybody; by this time Nettie had dismissed all those top-lofty notions about her paramount qualifications as an office-girl!

After the above recorded conversation, the association warmed to the point of their exchanging a "Good-morning," and telling each other that it was a nice day or a bad day or hot or cold as the case might be. But the first really lively interchange of talk was inaugurated when Mr. Peabody remarked, wrinkling his nose with strong disfavor: "What is that abominable smell?"

"It's this ink, Mr. Peabody. They had the same kind over at the bank. It's all bad nowadays. They must be putting something in it. I guess they can't get the right stuff any more."

Mr. Peabody picked up the ink-well which was freshly filled, and sniffed at it. "*Great day!*" he

exclaimed, setting it down hastily. His expression and gesture and that recondite oath which was the only one he was ever known to employ, surprised Nettie into a laugh. He smiled, too, catching her.

“Why, he isn’t so old after all!” Nettie thought, startled by some flash of boyishness about that smile. The Peabody Tool Works had been in existence with James Peabody at the head ever since she could remember; her father had spoken of having known him before she was born; and she had vaguely placed him not much this side of seventy.

She had been in the Peabody office, and Julia was out of the hospital some months looking strangely younger but “not good for anything” as she complained wistfully, when the United States entered the war. The drag-net of Circumstance with its huge proportions, its incredibly minute meshes, swept up the Stieffels along with the hundreds of thousands of others, greater and lesser. Roy volunteered; he had just turned nineteen and would have to go anyhow, he remarked philosophically. David lied about his age and went too. Nettie could no longer preserve her impersonal pose; in the intervals of clashing away at her typewriter, she knitted vehemently for our own boys instead of the Belgians, but there were few such intervals. If the Works had been busy before, they went into a very frenzy of activity now. Some of the office-force, among them not infrequently Nettie herself, were to be found working under green eye-shades long after hours every night. Mr. Peabody spent his days between Washington and home; he had contracts, and there were Government engineers forever waiting to see him, or assembling around his table with the blue-prints spread all over it. Sometimes

Nettie would be called in amongst the tired, earnest men, the khaki coats, the mounds of papers, the interminable lists of calculations.

“That young woman is trustworthy?” was occasionally asked. Mr. Peabody believed her to be.

“She has plenty of intelligence, as you must have noticed, and considerable strength of character, or I’m no judge,” he said, and added: “I don’t take much stock in all this hue-and-cry about spies.”

“We’ve got to trust somebody anyhow,” one of the men said. It was pointed out that women might be well-intentioned enough, but in general they could be duped or blarneyed with deplorable ease.

“Not this one, I think,” said Mr. Peabody. Nevertheless he did take occasion to say to Nettie one day with a hesitation not usual with him: “Miss Stieffel, you of course never — er —— talk outside about what goes on here?”

“No, sir,” said Nettie in a controlled voice, meeting his eye steadily. “I think I’d know if anybody was trying to pump me, too. I *think* I’d know !” She kept her temper under, but got so red that Mr. Peabody spoke again quickly. “That is what I thought,” he said, and Nettie was placated.

The little incident in some way established or affirmed a sober intimacy very much such as had existed between Mr. Marklein and herself; their relationship contrived to be impersonal yet kind, even genial, for this employer, Nettie discovered, possessed some qualities which she could not define but which she knew old Emil lacked; they may have been humor and sympathy. Moreover, he brought his excellent memory into play by saying another day: “I used to know a man named Stieffel years and years ago. I



believe he was at the Travelers' And Traders' at one time. Frank Stieffel. Any relation?"

"That's my father. He remembers you."

"Yes?" He asked more questions. "Locomotor? That's pretty hard. I'm sorry to hear it." He was silent a moment; Nettie did not guess that he was thinking with wonder how small the city had been in those days! There were different circles, of course; the women attended to that. They always do, everywhere. But in retrospect, it seemed to him that practically all the men in business knew one another — all the young fellows, certainly. And look at it now! One of the clubs he belonged to numbered some fifteen hundred members, of whom there were scores whom Jim had never met. And look at the traffic, the skyscrapers! They had always had a rotten political ring with an abundance of salable gangsters and handy-men — very up-to-date in that respect, at least; but otherwise, what changes a quarter of a century had wrought! He had made something of a name, and a fortune beside which the biggest fortunes of those years were inconsiderable; but as things went nowadays, if he should be attacked by locomotor he would drop out and be forgotten as soon and completely as this poor devil of a Stieffel. "Well, remember me to him, will you?" he said, and put aside his bootless moralizing, and got back to work.

Some while later he inquired where she lived; he had wanted to call her up, but her family did not appear among the roll of Stieffels in the telephone-book, so the matter, luckily of no urgent importance, had to wait. "Oh, we haven't got any," said Nettie rather amused. As if they could afford a telephone!

Mr. Peabody repeated the address after her.

“Rochester Avenue, Maplehurst. Oh, yes, that’s right by the old McQuair property. The house is there still — will be as long as the old lady lives, I suppose —” He interrupted himself — “She *is* living still, isn’t she?”

“Yes. Pretty feeble.”

“I *thought* we were paying her dividend yet —” A succeeding thought made James smile. “I met her once — went out there to see her.”

“That time you stopped the fight?” said Nettie.

He started, and stared at her hard. “*Great day!* Were you —? I recollect there were some little girls there. One of ’em wanted to turn the hose on —”

“That was *me!*” said Nettie, twinkling. They both laughed.

“I remember thinking at the time that that was the most practical measure I ever heard of — practical and original,” Mr. Peabody said.

Nettie hastened to assure him scrupulously that she had not thought it out by herself. “I wasn’t smart enough for that. Seems to me Jim Marvin — he was that biggest boy — seems to me he told me about seeing a dog-fight broken up that way —” Some change in Peabody’s expression halted her; then suddenly she remembered.

“Marvin?” he said rather abruptly. “How did you happen to know him?”

“Why, I’ve known him ever since we were little children — just kids,” Nettie said, openly. “I still see him every now and then — when he’s in town. But it’s been ever so long now —” Mr. Marvin, in fact, performed his well-known vanishing feat some six months before; it synchronized with our declaration of war, something which Nettie had already re-

marked and from which she had drawn a shrewd inference, for she went on ingenuously: "I thought he was trying to dodge the draft, but it'll get him anyhow. They get everybody."

Mr. Peabody smiled. "I see you've got a pretty good line on him."

"Why, of course! I told you I *knew* him!" Nettie said; and at that the other chuckled outright.

"I caught that fellow in a piece of crooked work, when he was employed in this office five years or so ago," said he. "It wasn't anything he could be held for, as it happened. He was one of those boys, you say? Funny!"

Nobody knew better than Nettie what the piece of crooked work had been. As Mr. Peabody spoke, she wondered at herself — and it was not the first time — for ever suffering Jim to come near her. She wondered, too, if Mr. Peabody would understand how one could like a person and have a contempt for him at the same time, supposing she tried to explain to him about herself and Jim. The trouble was that she herself could not understand the contradiction. A student of sex would have found in her attitude a triumphant vindication of the theory that a woman cannot or will not judge a case on its merits, but insists on reducing it to personalities. Nettie knew that Marvin was a blackguard — but he had never done anything blackguardly to *her*. He would never, for instance, offer her the insult young Marklein had offered. Jim respected her, he wanted to marry her; and for any woman on earth, even so just and clear-sighted a woman as Nettie, that balanced the scales.

Emil, by the way, was one of those whom the draft had "got"; he was up at Camp Sherman, discon-

tentedly drilling. Elmer Hands could have got a dispensation, seeing that he had a wife to support; but he had gone with the rest, and Mrs. Elmer did not appear to miss him much, or to be greatly concerned about his future. There had been what Rochester Avenue termed in inelegant but spirited language, "ructions" between the two; and it was even hinted under cover that divorce proceedings were in the air. The trouble was said to date from Millie's conversion to Altruism — not that Elmer had any deep-seated religious convictions, not on that score at all; he would probably just as lief have joined the Altruistic Brotherhood himself. What he stuck at — they said — was Millie's aspirations to Leadership; he admired her immensely, he was proud of her talents — but he did not want a Leader for a wife. And, as has heretofore been stated, no Leader wanted a husband.

Nettie, naturally, was aware of all this, though the gossip incontinently ceased, withered away like Jonah's gourd, in her presence. She would not listen, and steadfastly refused to take sides. She could not believe in Millie's sincerity; she told herself wearily that there must be something in it for Millie — pay, position, notice, entertainment, something. But Millie was her cousin, and she would not say anything about her, for or against.

"I'm sorry, Elmer," was as far as she would go in sympathy, when he came to see them a few days before leaving. "About you and Millie, I mean."

"Oh, if she wants it, I shan't do anything. I'd hate to have people think it was for desertion or non-support — and of course that's what most of 'em *will* think," said Elmer morosely. "You know I've always provided the best I could, and I wouldn't dream of

going off and leaving her scratch along by herself, like some men do their wives. But what's the use? I'm not going to contest it. She can charge anything she wants to."

"Oh, she'll say incompatibility, Elmer. Why, she *can't* say anything else; it would be ridiculous. Everybody *knows*."

"It don't make any difference, as long as she gets the decree — that's all she wants. I'm not going to stand in her way."

Mrs. Stieffel uttered a melancholy murmur about alimony, and he took her up savagely.

"Yeah. I suppose there'll be alimony. It don't make any difference." He stared down at the floor. "Six years. Nobody'd have thought it was going to end this way, would they? Well —! It ain't my fault, anyhow. Well —! S' long, folks!"

He went; all the young men went. In every shop, hotel, restaurant and office, the staff thinned out and the gaps were more or less inadequately reinforced with girls — girls, it may be added, of all ages, even up to the fifties; the hall-ways and elevators rustled with skirts, chirped with light voices. It was even necessary to admit them to the celibate regions of the clubs where not the descent of the Hunnish hordes themselves could have aroused greater consternation among the superannuated masculine personnel that remained. Those elderly head-waiters and stewards could have wept to behold a female creature taking orders in their impeccably smart dining-rooms — a female who didn't know *filet mignon* from liver-and-bacon, who thought Camembert was some sort of soup, who went tilting around on spool-heeled slippers, wore a low-necked lace waist, addressed the

gentlemen as "mister" and called the ladies "dearie." It was tragedy.

Nettie Stieffel, who herself was "doubling" in Mr. Fick's place at the Peabody offices, shared this feeling of outrage and superiority; she now had a raft of incompetents — so she regarded them — under her, whose mistakes tried her patience to a limit only exceeded by the indifference with which they witnessed her labors in correction. It seemed to her they must be endowed with an India-rubber resiliency of mind and memory and conscience, upon which she might toil in vain to make an impression. Very likely she exaggerated their shortcomings; her pitiless standards exacted as much of herself as of her underlings, and she was undoubtedly tired and nervous. Peabody himself remonstrated with her. "You're taking all the hills on high," he said, shaking his head at her in kindly warning. "No engine will stand that for long."

"But, Mr. Peabody, who's going to do it if I don't? Why, I couldn't sleep at night if I left anything to this bunch, without overseeing it myself. You don't know what they might do. They haven't got any sense."

"They haven't got *your* sense," said James. "But it wouldn't hurt to put a little responsibility on them, and see if they didn't develop some sense under it. That happens sometimes. You yourself didn't know as much when you began as you do now."

"The thing is I learned, and this lot never will," said Nettie obstinately.

"But you'll break down."

"All right, I'll break down!"

"Well, then, I'll tell you what," said the head of

the office, after a minute's thought. "If you will insist on staying late and working till all hours of the night, let me send my machine to take you home, anyhow. I'll have the man come every night at whatever hour you set. That'll save you that long, tiring ride home on the cars — and at night, too — I'm not sure —"

"Why, I've done it all my life, Mr. Peabody."

"That's a good enough record, so you may as well stop it now!" said James with final authority, accompanied, however, by the transmuting smile, that always for one swift instant, made a boy of him. He put aside her thanks. "Money in my pocket to keep you in shape!" he said. And thereafter the plain, comfortable car with the lame colored man who was driving for Mr. Peabody since his chauffeur went to camp, appeared nightly at the specified time in front of the building. Nettie arranged a signal with him, three staccato toots on the horn, and never kept him waiting, punctuality being one of her many unfeminine habits.

## XXI

**H**OLDING the opinions she did about Mr. Marvin's modest self-effacement, Nettie was a good deal surprised when he re-appeared one day, not quite in such fine feather as on the last occasion, but no more modest and self-effacing than before. Jim's eyes were as quick and roving, his carriage as swashbuckling as ever, his tongue as ready with cheap wit and wisdom. And so far from shunning the notice of authority, he dared it, even courted it at every turn, mixing freely with the uniforms, prompt and plausible with explanations as to why he himself was not wearing one.

"They wouldn't take me, consarn their ugly pictures!" he said, striking a note of humorous yet poignant chagrin which at once convinced, and enlisted sympathy. "Tried five times — nothing doing! The surgeons all say the same thing, so I suppose there must be some truth in it. Heart. There's what they call a murmur. A '*murmur!*'" Jim repeated with satiric emphasis. "I haven't noticed that it makes any difference with my appetite. I sleep like a baby, I don't know there's such a thing as a nerve in my whole body, and look at that muscle, will you? It's pretty hard. People naturally think: 'What's that big, husky specimen hanging round here for? Why isn't he packing a gun and training with the rest of the boys?' Then I have to tell 'em *heart*, and they don't half believe me. The last time I was examined and the sawbones handed me this heart



stuff, I said to him: 'Well, what the heck difference does your heart make? You're likely to get a bullet through it anyhow and in the meantime I might have a chance to pump a few into some fellow on the other side — and every little helps, don't it? Man can't die but once anyhow!' I says to him. I was pretty sore. He just laughed. If I had some kind of a pull I might get in — but I haven't, so there you are!" Jim finished with a sigh.

"You could get something to do, though — there's lots to be done besides fighting," said Nettie, as usual unfeelingly practical. "Desk work — or you might carry a hod at one of the construction camps, if nothing else came along."

Marvin allowed his unstable gaze to dwell on her for one instant of sharp scrutiny: he might not have been secure in his own mind as to the spirit of this remark, or how he had better take it. "Yeah. But do you know those fellows are holding the Government up for ten dollars a day? Tell you, in the ranks of Labor, you'll find true patriotism!" he declaimed ironically. "Not for mine! *They* wouldn't let me in either, I don't believe. They've all got unions, you know, and I don't see myself joining 'em. Nope, after I got rejected by everybody, I just naturally thought of something I could do, all by my little self." He eyed her again, as if hesitating; then came to a decision. "I'd just as soon tell *you* what it is," he said, in a cautious voice, leaning forward with wary glances around them; "I'm in the Intelligence. Secret Service, you know."

"*Oh!*"

"Yeah!" He nodded at her. "You're not to let on to anybody, you know that?"

"Sure not!" Nettie agreed cordially. She was, indeed, not likely to let on, if for no other reason than that she could not be certain whether this piece of information was true or not! She had her doubts; she always had her doubts of Marvin, sometimes against her will. The thing was possible; she had no idea of what a secret agent was called upon to do, but in the very nature of the work there must be considerable latitude allowed him; it seemed as if Jim might be better qualified for that than for anything else, better qualified than a man of less varied and dubious experience. The thing was possible — but that was just the trouble with it! Set a rogue to catching rogues was an antique maxim which Nettie instinctively disbelieved. It was not that she was too clever to be hoaxed, but that she was too honest.

"Pretty busy round your place?" Jim asked.

"Everybody's busy, aren't they?" said Nettie.

"Aren't *you*?"

"Oh, I've got enough to do," he said with significance. "I look like I hadn't a care in the world, but that's part of this job."

Was it? Again suspicion went tiptoe through her mind.

"We've got office-men and field-men like any other concern, generally speaking," Marvin went on expansively. "They put you where you can be the most use. Now I was born in this old town — I know it like a book, so —" his gesture finished the sentence. "How's the office look these days? Same as when I used to be there?"

"I don't know. I never saw it when you used to be there."

"Well, it took up most of the sixth floor, His Nibs,

James P., had the room at the southwest corner — must have been pretty hot in summer, but he never seemed to mind it. Is he there still?’

“Oh, he’s all over the place,” said Nettie. “I run the girls.”

“Uh-huh. I heard Fick had gone. There’s hardly anybody but girls up there now, they say. I guess James P. thinks war’s hell, all right!” Jim remarked with his depraved humor. He looked at his watch and gave a start — or affected to — as suddenly remembering an engagement. “Well, I’ll be dropping in on you some of these days. I’d like to see the old place.” He gave Nettie a look as if challenging her to question this bit of bravado; and Nettie let it pass. If he thought she believed it, or that she had forgotten the circumstances of his leaving “the old place,” or, in short, was not “on to him” from first to last — if he thought her such a simp, why, let him! Nettie said to herself contemptuously.

In fact, Mr. Marvin made no haste to carry out his announced intention of dropping in; he contented himself with calling Nettie up by telephone, with asking her out to luncheon, with lavish offerings of violets and bonbons, and with rather high-flavored notes in his reckless sprawling hand; the messenger-boys were constantly arriving with them. It embarrassed Nettie; she knew that her subordinate petticoats were all eyes and ears and wagging tongues, and was a little anxious lest it undermine her authority. “I know all about girls — the run of them,” she thought grimly. She refused Jim’s invitations, gave away the stuff, paraded her indifference to men’s attentions and her absorption in her work with every opportunity; example is better than precept.

Marvin went out to the house twice or thrice; but had no luck in catching her. "I told him you weren't scarcely ever at home nowadays, 'count of working at the office morning, noon and night," Mrs. Stieffel said. "He was awful disappointed, but he acted real nice about it, staying and talking like he'd come to see all of us — only he talked about you most of the time, of course; a man can't *pretend* very good. I always did like Jim Marvin, whatever they say about him," Maggie protested irrelevantly. "Why didn't you tell him yourself you were at the office evenings, Nettie? Seems a kinda pity the poor fellow coming out here expecting to see you. I could see it worried him your working so hard. 'Peabody's making a slave of her. He's a reg'lar slave-driver,' he kept saying. And he wanted to know what it was you had to do. He said you might get writer's cramp, or hurt your eyes or something."

"For the gracious' sake, Jim Marvin should worry about me, shouldn't he?" ejaculated Nettie with amused skepticism. But the account touched her, in spite of herself. Jim was really fond of her in his way — his scoundrel's way,

It was one night a week or so later that she went back to the office after supper at the Kentucky Kitchen, as usual, to finish up a sheaf of letters. The streets and the building itself were sparsely lighted in obedience to conservation orders, and Nettie had to climb the half-dozen flights of stairs to the office floor; the elevator ran only till six o'clock, and all the girl operators had gone home, though there were offices still open here and there throughout the big structure. Nobody complained of these inconveniences; it was all in the day's work. Nettie stoically climbed. She

passed the rooms vacated by the Ohio Valley & Western Railway when the Government took it over; the gilt lettering was still on the windows obscured by the posters of the Fourth Liberty Loan. On the next floor, a firm of brokers had collapsed last spring as a remote result of the Allied reverses; their rooms had recently been opened to accommodate a rummage-sale for the benefit of Devastated France; it was dark and still in there among the discarded party-dresses and out-of-date hats, the Victorian steel-engravings, the wash-stand sets and crippled furniture. Nettie climbed past them, past the real-estate office on the succeeding landing, past the Bemis-Cadwallader Soap Company — sadly depopulated regions, all of them. “Looks as if they’d have to turn this side of the building into tenements or barracks for the soldiers or something, directly,” she mused. “It’s lonesome after dark this way — it’s lonesome even in the broad daylight.”

The lonesomeness did not affect her determination to work, however. She reached her own territory, and went in and turned on the light, and set to at the letters. It was after nine before she got through, and began clearing away in preparation for to-morrow. In Mr. Peabody’s room there was some disorder, and that day’s collection of blue-prints was still lying to one side where he must have piled it to make a space for writing. Nettie stacked the sheets in order, lingering to admire the exquisite precision of the mechanical drawings. They were the plans for the big gun-lathe they were going to build for the Government out at the Kirk’s Station shops — the biggest gun-lathe in the world, capable of boring an eighteen-inch gun, the biggest gun in the world. When finished, this

leviathan tool would be the length of a city square; the men would take a week to knock it down and pack it for shipment to the United States Navy-Yard at Norfolk; fourteen flat cars would be needed for the transportation; it would cost half a million dollars — “And when that gun gets on the job, she’ll blow the Germans to hell-and-gone!” one of the designers had said, nervously exultant. “Oh, I — I beg your pardon, Miss —!” Nettie smiled to recall his abashed face. She looked up —

“Hello!” said Jim, standing at the inner door.

In one second, a dozen half-framed thoughts raced through Nettie’s head — that this part of the building was practically deserted — that Marvin had been spying on her and the office with his pertinacious attentions — that the story about his being a Federal agent was too thin — that he might be anybody’s agent — that something might easily have leaked out where so many people were employed as at the Peabody Tool Works — that he had never harmed her — that he was a scoundrel — that he was in love with her — that his presence might not mean anything — that, at any rate, nobody had any business there at such an hour except herself. She made a strong effort.

“Why, hello yourself, Sherlock! I didn’t hear you come in.”

“I made enough noise,” said Jim. “The folks told me you were here every night, and I saw the lights, but I began to think maybe you’d gone away and left ’em burning.”

There was nothing amiss with this statement, save that he had not made any noise; Nettie was very sure he had not made any noise. And why this deliberate

stealth? "I didn't hear you," she repeated, her distrust congealing.

"Nobody round here but you?" said Jim, sauntering in with over-acted negligence of movement — or so it seemed to her watchful suspicion. "Say, Nettie, that's not very safe, is it?"

"You should worry!" Nettie retorted, quoting herself mechanically; to her direct character speech that did not express her thought was well-nigh an impossibility; and just now her mind revolved in blankness. She kept on matching the prints together, and the feel of them under her hands, within her defenses, steadied her. "It's safe enough, I guess. I'm not afraid anyhow."

"No, you're never afraid of anything," said Jim with a laugh. He stood in the center of the room, with his hands in his pockets, staring around idly. "This is J. P.'s same old cozy corner. Looks like home to me. Aren't you going to ask me to sit down?"

"Why no, Jim, I wasn't thinking of it," said Nettie coolly. "I was going to tell you to go, if you want to know what I was going to do."

"But I never have a chance to see you or talk to you, Nettie," he remonstrated in an injured tone, drawing nearer her. "You won't let me. I'll have to be going away again soon, and I got to thinking maybe I wouldn't have another chance, if I didn't come up here to-night. I know Peabody hasn't got any use for me, and I didn't want to get you in bad with him or I'd have come in the day-time, office-hours or no office-hours," he explained humbly, candidly — if only she could have believed him! "What's the

matter, Nettie? You know how I feel about you. You know what it is I want to talk to you about. You're not mad at me, are you? You're not going to turn me down again? What's the matter?"

What the matter was, Nettie did not know. His face and gesture were lover-like; there was no parallel between his decent feeling decently expressed and the besmirching sensualities of such a creature as Marklein. Nettie had not feared Marklein in the least, she merely hated him; whereas she knew herself to be afraid of Jim, but with the difference that she was not afraid for herself. She stood behind the table, her eyes following his every motion, her senses taut. "You've got to go, Jim. You can't come and stay around here day or night or any other time. I can't listen to you. You've got to go."

"Oh, Nettie, please!" He came nearer still, reaching as if for her hand. Nettie made a movement. "What are you grabbing at those papers for?" said Marvin, apparently surprised; then he laughed indulgently. "Why, I believe you think I'm after them! I don't even know what they are. Maps?" He put out his hand again.

To the day of her death Nettie will be convinced that he meant and had meant all along to get the blueprints, although actually nothing that he said or did indicated any such dark purpose. She will swear up and down that as he kept coming closer to her, she saw his shoulders move and the position of his whole body alter as if the muscles were contracting in readiness for a sudden and violent movement. It may all have been her fancy; nobody will ever know. She swept the drawings behind her to the floor; she screamed out; she snatched the nearest weapon.



“ No, you don't, Jim Marvin, you don't put it over me that way! I know you, you crook! Get out of here! Get quick, or —!”

And with another scream, an oath, a thump on the floor, with the table scraping, with a chair slamming over and glass splintering, and more screams upon screams, the thing happened. When help rushed in, they found Nettie still screaming hysterically, the blue-prints — by good luck uninjured — scattering everywhere, Marvin half-stunned and groaning on the floor, a ghastly sight with blood running down from the gash in his forehead, and the whole wild scene enveloped in an unholy aroma of ink.

For, if Nettie had only known it, strong-arm measures were not necessary. Amos had arrived with the car that night, on time as usual; and after performing the little obligato on the horn several times at intervals without any signs of or from her, who was invariably so prompt, he began to be uneasy. Perhaps about the unlighted streets and the silent, gloomy building, a sixth sense inherited from some jungle-living ancestor detected something forbidding or of evil omen. At any rate, Amos was a good, faithful darky, a respectable man with young daughters of his own, and quite alive to his responsibilities. He waited in growing disquiet. He did not like to leave the car, and it may be the flight of stairs daunted him with his lameness; for the same reasons, according to his subsequent statements, he did not “projek erroun'” in search of the janitor or the night-watchman. They might be up on the sixteenth floor, if indeed they were in the neighborhood at all, of which he had not ill-founded doubts. In this dilemma as he fidgetted on the curb, along came two soldiers, on furlough from

Fort William across the river; Amos laid the situation before them. They were respectively twenty and twenty-one years old, Private Leon Casanova from New York City originally, and Private Jackson Bodie of Bolivar, Alabama; they had been to a movie of raw life in the West: "Men With The Bark On"; and nothing could give them greater pleasure than to rescue the lady if she needed rescuing. The queer thing is that as this volunteer posse went galumphing up the stairs in heavy marching boots, Nettie and her visitor did not hear them; when Casanova and Bodie reached the fourth landing, they heard the screams clearly and unmistakably enough — *Oh, boy!*

"And after all, when we got there, there wasn't nothing left to do but kinda pick up the pieces!" said Leon, in disappointment. "Bodie here, he says to her 'My God, ma'am!' he says, 'Did he do anything to youse?' He didn't like to put it no plainer than that, y'know, but these Southerners, they think of *that*, the first thing, and Bodie he wasn't going to wait for no cop. He was all set to drop the guy outa the window —"

"Shut up, you wop!" said Bodie amiably; "I wasn't aimin' to do no sech a thing."

"She was all excited and crying, but she fin'ly got out that he hadn't hurt her. She beat him to it!" said the other young man with a grin. "He made a stab at the papers or whatever it was, and she hauled off and beaned him with the ink-stand — one of these big square glass ink-stands, y'know, that spread out at the bottom and weigh half a ton. She aimed good, too — caught him right over the eye — *Zowie!* What d'ye know about that, for a woman throwing!"

"PLAN TO BURGLARIZE OFFICES OF PEABODY TOOL

WORKS FOILED BY PLUCKY STENOGRAPHER. YEGGMAN TAKEN TO HOSPITAL IN SERIOUS CONDITION. SOLDIER BOYS RENDER TIMELY ASSISTANCE," the morning papers proclaimed with as much attention to the facts as morning-papers commonly display. Undoubtedly the occurrence would have been "featured" in further issues in peace times; but this was during our advance in the Argonne, and nobody was deeply interested in home news, however sensational. Besides there was not much information forthcoming. Nettie had to take two or three days of rest and absolute quiet — doctor's orders — so that the reporters must be denied; Amos and the two privates knew no more than has been recited; Mr. Peabody was most affable but non-committal; Marvin at the hospital — not in a "serious condition," however — would probably have refused an interview in extremely positive not to say violent language, had the authorities allowed anyone to see him; even Rochester Avenue never knew all the details; even the Stieffel household and Maggie herself, influenced in some occult fashion by Mr. Peabody's personality, for once could not be beguiled into gossip. In fine, the circumstances were such that the story, so to speak, died a natural death, and has never been resurrected from that day to this.

It was as much by Mr. Peabody's orders as by Doctor White's that Nettie took that recess — orders under which she was inclined to fret a good deal. James showed himself "awful appreciative," as Maggie noticed with weak surprise and wonder; she did not believe that the bank or Mr. Marklein would have done so much. Nettie's employer sent a trained nurse, whom they prevailed upon to go away, seeing that she was not actively needed; he sent flowers, sent

candy, sent a beautiful antique Bohemian glass toy from the dressing-table of some eighteenth-century great lady, filled with some sort of rare and sinfully costly smelling-salts; he sent the automobile daily to take Nettie out for an airing; and finally came himself on the Sunday following the excitement. By a miracle, in which Nettie herself undoubtedly had a hand, the house was in fair order. It was she who opened the door, answering his exclamation of concern with all her natural spirit.

“Oh, stuff!” she said briskly, forgetting for a moment the august eminence of the person addressed. The fact is James did not look at all august; he looked like a nice middle-aged gentleman with something on his mind. “Oh, stuff!” said Nettie; “I’m all right, and there never was anything the matter with me anyhow — except I got a little excited.”

She led him into the dining-room, and they sat down on opposite sides of the table, very much as they were in the habit of sitting day in and day out at the office.

“I’m coming back to-morrow.”

“Are you sure you’re well enough?”

“Well, just look at me! Do I look sick? Oh, I’ve got to Mr. Peabody, I just *must!*” said Nettie vehemently. “I can’t stay around here doing nothing this way.”

“I wish some of the others felt that way,” he said with a smile, which vanished as his eyes traveled slowly over her; perceptibly there was something on his mind. “They aren’t like you, though. They couldn’t be if they tried. For that matter I doubt if there are many women anywhere who would sail into a thug with an ink-stand, because they thought he was going to steal some blue-prints —”

"Mr. Peabody, he *was* going to take them! I didn't just *think* he was!" said Nettie obstinately. "You can't tell me anything about Jim Marvin. I know him through and through. He didn't mean to hurt me if he could help it. But I saw him getting ready; he went just like a cat does when it's going to jump on a bird or something — just that same way. I had to do something!"

"Well, you did it!" said James. "Up at the hospital they had to put in five stitches. The doctors thought at first there might be some trouble on account of that ink; but I daresay the smell's the worst part of it. Anyhow they washed Marvin up with antiseptics, and they say there's no danger of blood-poisoning. He's healing. Scarred for life, though."

"What are they going to do with him, Mr. Peabody?"

He made a comic wry face. "Why, Nettie, it's a funny thing, but as far as I'm concerned and the attempt on the office, it's just the same as that other time. Can't do anything! There's nothing he could be held for. He didn't break in; he didn't take anything, and you can't even swear that he tried to. He didn't attack you. You attacked him!" James laughed outright. "You see?"

Nettie saw, but she refused to laugh. "Yes, but —"

"Wait a minute. They think they'll get him on an entirely different count. It seems he told several people that he was an agent for the Department of Justice. Of course, he was nothing of the kind —"

"I guess he was working for the other side, wasn't he? Seems as if he was just the sort of man they'd

hire, and that was just the sort of thing they'd want him to do."

"Well, the officials are very close-mouthed about everything like that. Personally I never have believed in all these German spy yarns, you know; I'm confident there's not one in twenty of 'em that's the truth or anywhere near it. People seem to think this ought to convert me — but it hasn't. Anyhow, impersonating a Government officer is a serious offense, so I fear — I greatly fear —" said Mr. Peabody, wagging his head in burlesque anxiety — "that it's all up with our friend Marvin. Too bad! A promising career cut short!"

"Yes, he told me that — about his being in the Secret Service, I mean," Nettie said. "But I — why, I didn't really believe him. I don't see how anybody could believe him."

Mr. Peabody rubbed one ear reflectively. "It does strike one as not quite in the spirit of justice to clap a man in jail for telling a story that nobody believed," he said; and this time Nettie joined in his laugh. "I think myself the miserable shoddy rascal is punished enough as it is," said James humanely. "Being marked for life will be a grave handicap to him when he gets out and begins his flimflamming again. But he was headed for State's prison sooner or later, anyhow, Nettie. It's a marvel that he's escaped this long."

There was a silence.

"Oh, I called you Nettie!" said Mr. Peabody, precipitately. "I beg your pardon."

"Why, I don't mind."

Another silence of oppressive length, James' pre-

occupation settling down on him again. Nettie mechanically plaited and unplaited the fringe of the red plush table-runner in an embarrassment such as she never felt when alone with Mr. Peabody in the office. But there is a difference between sitting closeted with a man taking his dictation, and sitting with the same man when by an abnormal chance he has come to call on you. Their positions seemed somehow to be reversed; he was no longer the boss, he was only a man, and not wholly at his ease either, it was obvious. The introduction of some kindly, familiar theme such as gears, templets or castings would relieve the situation mightily, but it was impossible. However, something must be done. "Have those Selden-McLeod people ever answered anything about that milling-machine yet, Mr. Peabody?"

He started abruptly, looking at her as if his mind had been incalculably removed from Seldon-McLeod and milling-machinery, and as if it were incalculably difficult to bring it to bear on those matters. "I—I don't know." This was his astounding reply. "I haven't paid much attention to—to all that since you've been away. I—I got out of touch with it on account of the—er—the girls—the other girls not being quite able to—er—to take hold of the correspondence," James said, stammering and stumbling and turning red over this palpably off-hand attempt at an excuse. "Nice girls, all of them," he added hastily, "but—"

"Oh, I expect one of them could have taken your letters, if you'd tried her," said Nettie, chivalrously concealing her satisfaction. Far be it from Nettie Stieffel to "knock" any other girl—but of course

those dubs couldn't take his letters! They didn't know a comma from a period; they'd be asking him how to spell every other word; they —

“I've missed you,” said Jim Peabody. For, with the words, Nettie again became aware with a sensation as of the universe turning topsy-turvy that this was Jim Peabody across the table — not the boss, not the head of the Peabody Tool-Works.

“That's — that's — I'm glad — I mean a person likes to think they're missed, of course,” she stammered in her turn. “Those were lovely things you sent.”

“They — they weren't anything. I'm glad you liked them, though. I wasn't sure what a girl would like. I've never known many girls.”

“They were lovely,” Nettie repeated. “I'd have been a queer kind of girl not to be pleased — only I'm not a girl at all any more, Mr. Peabody. I'm thirty. I've had my thirtieth birthday.”

“I'm nearly forty-nine.”

The compliments that may suitably be offered upon a person's attaining the age of forty-nine — if indeed there is anything complimentary to be said on such an occasion! — did not occur to Nettie; she had no skill in that direction. She sat silent, assiduously plaiting and unplaiting.

“There's a good deal of difference in our ages,” Jim said. “But it seems as if it didn't count when two people are — when they have — when they feel — when they — Nettie, I want you to marry me.”

The skies did not fall. The world did not rock beneath her feet. She was not surprised, because for an eternity, beginning some five seconds previously, she had felt what was approaching. She looked him



bravely in the face. "Mr. Peabody, I don't think I ought to get married. I've got the folks to take care of — well, I don't mean that I take the whole care — we all work — but they couldn't get along very well without me —"

"They don't have to. I would —"

"But I wouldn't want you to do for them," cried Nettie, flushing. "Just because of me. It wouldn't be right. And anyway, you don't help people at all, somehow, when you help them too much," she added, out of her hard experience.

"I think we could get around that difficulty," said James very practically. "It's like you not to want your family to be dependent on anybody or beholden to anybody. But suppose we leave them out for a minute. I want to know if —?"

"Why, I — I —"

He came around to her side of the table.

And so they were married and lived happily ever after — at least Mr. and Mrs. James Peabody have every appearance of living happily, and beyond question they live comfortably. For the rest, how shall you and I guess in what estate, with what aspirations fulfilled and unfulfilled, what defeats and achievements recorded, any single one of our fellow-men reaches the hour of meridian? What looks like a camel may very well be a mouse, for all we know — or the other way around!

Not long since, the Peabody couple were taking the air of a Sunday evening when their car came abreast of a little flock of motors shepherded by the policemen in front of the splendid temple erected on one of our suburban streets for the devotional use of that sect of

ultra-profound and advanced religious thinkers, the Altruistic Brotherhood. The bluecoat held up his hand; everybody within his danger — to adopt a mediaeval phrase — came to a stand; and there debouched magnificently from the side street a limousine that only needed outriders to suggest royalty. It drew up before the flight of steps leading to the doors of the sanctuary, and accompanied by sundry of the faithful in a dazzling display of haberdashery, the Leader descended, clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful. She trailed up the steps with a kind of solemn grace; the reverently admiring Altruists closed in after her; volumes of noble melody rolled abroad from the Altruistic organ — it cost eighteen thousand dollars. No expense was spared in the construction of the sacred edifice; the Altruists are substantial people, and it is understood their Leader occupies the best-salaried pulpit in the city. One and all, they agree that she is a woman of powerful mentality, whose persuasive eloquence “carries you right along with her.” They would be willing to pay almost any sum to retain her services, but fear that the bid from one of the big eastern cities will over-size them.

“There’s your cousin,” said Peabody to his wife.

“Yes. I saw her.”

The officer released them; all the motors moved on. Nettie sat back in her corner in a mood of meditation lasting so long that he inquired after a while: “What’s on your mind?”

“Hey? Oh, nothing. I was just thinking —” She was silent again for a moment, staring abstractedly at the chauffeur’s back. “They ask an awful price for those uniforms,” she said at length. “Compared to what they used to — and they never were

real cheap. It's expensive keeping up a machine."

"Well, we'll keep ours anyhow till we go broke, and that won't be for quite a while yet. You weren't worrying about that?"

Nettie laughed. "I wasn't worrying about anything. I just got to thinking — seeing Millie started me, I believe —" her voice trailed off, and her eyes grew absent once more.

"Thinking about what?" Peabody asked with some curiosity.

She roused herself, turning to him a perplexed smile. "I was just thinking, Jim, how funny life is. Now take Millie and I, for instance. We sort of started out together, and you might say we started even. We're about of an age, you know; and we both had to work. Millie was an awfully pretty girl — she's pretty as can be still —"

"She hasn't got anything on *you!*" said James.

"Oh yes, I know I never was homely," said Nettie in her simple and straightforward way. "I shouldn't be surprised if I looked older than she does nowadays, though. You see I always worked harder, and took things harder. Millie never worked, and she never worried about anything. She was always expecting to marry some rich man and have a good time the rest of her life. I don't believe she gave it up even when she got married to Elmer! And then she was always getting around the men in a — in a — a kind of *woman-y* way," said Nettie uncomfortably. "If you know what I mean —?"

"Yes, you come across women like that once in a while," said Jim, rather guardedly.

"Well, I never was that kind. I never liked it. I thought it was all wrong — or silly anyhow. I

meant to make a success all by myself. You can see we were just *opposite* — as opposite as could be. And here we've ended up even, just about like we commenced!" said Nettie, with a look of wonder.

"I don't exactly understand —?"

"Why, Millie's where she wants to be, isn't she? She has plenty of money, and she doesn't work any to speak of. Those old Altruists —! Millie looks kind of calm and lovely, and she dresses up in that Greek way, and she's got a nice voice, and she goes stringing along a lot of — of —"

"Of flappedoodle," her husband supplied, nodding. "Yes, I know."

"And they think she's *great!* That's all she cares about — to live easy, and have people make a lot over her. She never does a lick of real work, never sets her foot to the ground. She goes rolling around in that elegant car; I don't know whether it's hers or whether she works somebody for the use of it, but anyhow there she is! And here I am, rolling around in a car, too! And I've got everything anybody could want, too, same as she has! And yet look how opposite we are and how opposite we've always thought and acted! It was thinking about it that made me say life was funny. It *is* funny — how you begin and how you end up; what you start out after and what you get!" Nettie summed up, still puzzled, still wondering. She was not thinking of mice or camels; the quaint little allegory must have passed out of her memory within half an hour of hearing it, and has never revisited her since.

James Peabody laid his hand over hers. "The thing is: are you happy?"

"Oh, my, yes, I'm happy."



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